

Chapter 1

Harry wondered how they'd never seen her around the school, as she wasn't like any of the other girls he had seen in the halls- what with her lack of makeup and the uncontrolled curls that bounced around her face. Most of the girls were in a dark eyeliner phase, with straight choppy hair to give them an edgy look. His green eyes blinked as he watched her shyly inch her way around the library crowds, book bag held tight to her side by two anxious hands as she bit her lip and kept her eyes darting about.

The Hogwart's librarian was having fits for this stuffy hour- as it seems all of Hogwarts had come out to use the library, and not just for books- at best it sounded like half of the school and guests were there. Harry didn't know how he picked the girl out from the crowds, even with her distinctive features she seemed to blend in and direct his attention elsewhere- which just made Harry more curious.

It was this innate curiosity of his that had gotten him into tough scrapes throughout the years- the philosopher's stone drawing his curiosity along with his need for understanding. He was thrust into this strange world of power and magic and he had wanted to learn everything he could get his hands on- it was a wonder that he hadn't noticed her before with all the heavy observing he'd been doing. He could easily recall the faces of most students in his year, but couldn't recall that girl.

Certainly her hair must have hid her sometimes – often, he amended as he watched her duck her head and slip away from his view into the shadows between some stacks – but surely her hair would be recognizable?

He turned to Ginny Weasley.

Harry and Ron Weasley were very close friends- had been since their first year, although they'd had an awkward start, uniting against the mutual teasing by another boy now their rival. Ron's younger sister kind of just fell into their group when she began attending Hogwarts, though Harry sometimes felt uncomfortable in her presence he

wouldn't do anything to upset his almost family- especially after the almost falling out they'd had at the beginning of the year.

Molly Weasley was a matriarch to the core, and had shocked Harry when she had greeted him so politely and then drawn him into a bone crushing hug. He had never felt more loved- and consequently he adored whatever time he could get with any person of the family, though it had taken him a while to warm up to Percy Weasley (that was only until he'd discovered the boy had a peculiar interest in botany- something Harry had vast experience in and could help him with, especially after he'd seen the gangly teen blush and procure the hand grown daffodil to Penelope Clearwater).

Ginny should know about the girls in the school- a good gossip, though she claimed she never did anything malicious with the information she acquired (though Harry wondered if there was anything kind about gossip in the first place...), and a good friend to most the girls in their house- if she didn't know anything about that particular girl she would know someone who did.

He furrowed his brow and pushed his glasses up his nose, annoyed at the faint hairline crack at the corner that always caught his eye. "Ginny..."

She looked up with sparkling eyes and a very relieved hand dropping her quill onto her parchment. He held back a grin as he saw her barely started essay on newt's eyeballs. He sobered when she leaned forward with an expectant look in her eye as he squirmed.

Maybe he should have waited to ask Seamus?

He cleared his throat. "Do you know most of the girls?"

She quirked an eyebrow at him while settling back into her chair heavily as she gave him an affronted look. "I am friends with lots of the girls." She stated with a sniff and an upturn of her nose.

He flushed slightly.

Ron snickered and grabbed a chocolate frog from their hidden pile under some crumpled parchment, his eyes darting about frantically

for the librarian before he stuffed the whole squirming sugary mess into his mouth.

Ginny snorted before returning her distracted focus onto him.

He rubbed the back of his neck and looked back to the stacks the mystery girl had disappeared into. "Do you know any girl," He glanced over to the crowd hanging around that wall, "about the height of Susan?"

She laughed at him, her head thrown back and red hair bouncing. "Harry you silly git! Half the student population is the same height as Susan!"

Ron gave her an incredulous look before snorting and turning to Harry with a sympathetic look. "She's bloody mad." Ginny kept laughing, little snorts escaping her. "Susan is awfully short for our year."

Ginny stopped and took a deep exaggerated breath as she calmed. "Really Harry, You guys think everyone is short."

Harry snorted- because everyone was short. But he kept that to himself- Ginny was very particular about certain things, and her height was one of them. Harry himself wasn't tall, but he lazed about with one of the tallest boys in their year and consequently judged height based on that. "Well, I just saw someone, and I don't think I've seen her before."

Both Weasley's sobered before Ginny leaned forward and whispered. "Maybe it was the library ghost."

Ron nodded somberly before leaning forward in a scheming manner. "Yeah, they say she's so shy she haunts the stacks and scares away any who trespass."

It was times like these when he hated these two- he could never tell when they were taking the Mickey out of him. And when he was trying to be serious about something, and get a serious answer, they sometimes didn't get it.

They cracked up laughing just seconds after that thought.

Harry sighed and returned to reading his book- though he really had no clue how underwater plants would help his assignment on transfiguration, Neville had recommended it from a reliable source. And the poor boy was passing *somehow*.

Harry briefly grimaced at the malicious thought before he shook his head and returned to his attempt at the assignment, worried he wouldn't get it done on time for class tomorrow- but he was still distracted enough for one more glance to the shadowed stacks.

He shook his head and picked up his quill- determined to finish this and then figure out the girl later.

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It was a few days before he saw her again, and he was so startled he nearly dropped his bag but recovered it and still ended up stumbling. She didn't look up towards the noise, though McGonagall scowled from her desk before muttering something and returning to her grading.

Harry sheepishly rubbed his head before he looked around to his usual seat, pausing briefly when he realized that there was no one else there and he could sit wherever he wanted- but then McGonagall gave him a disproving look and he flushed before abruptly sitting in the seat he stood beside.

It was a few uncomfortable minutes before the rest of the class trickled in, Ron yawning and slumping into his customary seat beside Harry before letting his head land on the desk with a hollow sound.

Harry snickered and class started- he completely forgot his quest to find out more about the silent girl.

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Malfoy sneered cruelly before smacking her on the arm, Harry watching her spin around and face the Slytherin trio as she held her books tightly to her chest. Harry wondered how her arms could hold

all those thick library tomes without somehow dropping them- she was such a small thing the books practically became a shield.

She licked her lips and then pushed her chin out in defiance- the act making her look more vulnerable than brave as she'd been trying to go for. Malfoy laughed and elbowed his sidekicks to join in the fun, putting his hands behind his back to leisurely stroll around the girl with the lion's mane.

She stiffened up even more, her eyes widening in a glare that made them look gold with all the light reaching them from the stained glass window. Malfoy smirked as he watched his prey, and Harry puffed as he quickened his stride to meet the two- the crowd milling around did nothing.

He spotted Ginny Weasley off to the side with her pack of girls, watching but making no move to help as Harry thought she would have. He was glad to notice that the rest of the crowd wasn't made up of those from the pride; he didn't think he could live knowing his house could be so cruel to stand by and simply watch this.

"The little mudblood," Draco sneered, his eyes darting over the crowd for their reactions before he all out grinned (a rarity, though Harry found he didn't even like it when Draco Malfoy smiled instead of smirked), "walking through the halls all alone."

The girl straightened now, staring at him intently as he continued to circle and watch her with disdainful eyes.

Malfoy growled. "The silly little savage probably doesn't understand a word I'm saying...o dear, it's a wonder she attends our prestigious school."

Harry doubled his pace as he got his second wind, feeling his chest tighten as she girl pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes- though he could still see that suspicious shine. He felt his own growl building at the back of his throat as he reached the crowd, pushing his way through easily due to his experience having to fight for his place (however measly that place was) in his muggle home.

He made it to the center of the gathered circle, strangely reminded of a muggle witch trial as he used his presence to get between the girl and Malfoy (whose face turned from sneering and delighted to stunned and disgusted realization).

He watched the crowd break away- only a few looking at him with blushing, shamed faces while the rest simply shrugged and continued on as if looking for more entertainment to break up the monotony of life.

He sighed and scratched his cheek as he turned around to face the girl, his shoes squeaking on the clean stone as he watched her straighten out her things and then look up to him as if confused as to why he was still there.

He gave her a small grin, watched as she gave him an unsure grin in return- and he wondered how something so uncertain could still be so inviting. "My name's Harry." His grin widened and he stretched out his hand, watching her blush and then shuffle the books around in her arms before she managed to shake his offering hand.

He laughed and her smile turned sheepish before her lips pressed together and she looked down the hall- the direction she had been going in. He felt his brows furrow, that strange pinching sensation that tickled his brain making him back off the thought, before he nodded his head.

He watched her go with the strange thought becoming prominent, he had seen her house patch when she had shifted...so why had he never seen his fellow Gryffindor in the den?

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Hermione hugged her binder tighter to her chest while - watching the other kids go on to the playground - she prepared herself for the walk home. She bit her lips, drawing them in between her teeth as she watched them with wide wary eyes, the brown glossy and dark as she waited for just the right moment- they had to look away sometime. She sniffled as the group finally turned to the playground equipment, their attention now focused away from her as she shuffled her way out the door quietly and then edged along the schoolyard fence.

She had gotten through the day again.

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Chapter 2

He watched her smiling brightly and listening to Neville- having stumbled upon the pair in a deserted corner of the stacks where a study area had been set up. He wondered if there were any more- because it was rather cozy with the sunlight and nicely cushioned chairs. He stepped closer to the stack he was against, hoping they hadn't seen him as he peered through to watch them interact.

He smiled when he saw the normally stuttering and bumbling Neville talk clearly and then laugh at something she did in response.

"Hermione!" Neville's shock washed over his face suddenly before he blushed and laughed sheepishly. He ducked his head and rubbed the back of his neck- a defensive gesture Harry knew he performed himself; also, one that made him wonder if Neville had been treated as badly as he had been. Neville sighed before grinning more strongly. "I don't think Sue would like me though- I mean I have that reputation."

Harry almost stumbled as he leaned forward to hear the response from 'Hermione'. Her shoulders shook with a giggle he barely heard as she tried to cover up her mouth with her hand, and then she shook her head and lifted her hands and started to make signs. He felt his mouth drop as he squinted and focused, Neville repeating the action as he paid due attention to the hand signs and tried to interpret them.

When she finished the boy shrugged humbly before stating, "I didn't know many of those."

Hermione blushed before licking her lips and speaking. "I said that if she can't see how great you are then she's really not worth it." The way she stumbled with the heavy nasal accent surprised him before everything fell into place, and Harry leaned boneless against the stacks as she leaned over the table to hold Neville's hands firmly in her own. "You've been a great friend to a Nobody, and if she can't see how loyal and brave you are to do that then she's a blind daft bint." She nodded her head firmly, eyes shining as she smiled softly squeezing his hands briefly before winking and laughing- her hands once again drawing up to cover her mouth.

Neville grinned and leaned back in his chair. "Hermione Granger- I think you might have a protective complex over me."

She smiled and signed something back in response, before suddenly sobering and doing a slower sequence of hand positions.

Neville grimaced. "Sorry," he spoke precisely now and more clearly, "I said that I think you have a protective complex over me." And as he spoke his hands made simple movements around his chin- Hermione watching before her face cleared and she grinned while moving to pack up her stuff.

Harry got out of there as quietly and as quickly as he could.

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Harry felt his breath burn its way down his throat and his nose stinging as a result of the heavy breathing he'd needed to escape from the cemetery with the comatose Cedric. He felt the blood trickle from his hand and winced as the crowd finally hushed and his head rung with the silence. He didn't let go of his grip on Cedric's shirt collar, fingers claspings even tighter when hands tried to pry the two champions apart.

He finally gasped as air rushed completely into his lungs, the warm feeling of a medical spell tingling along his blood as he looked around frantically. Dumbledore was talking calmly, though Harry could see the residual anger in his glittering eyes.

Harry blacked out for a second and when he shook his head to clear it he was further away from Cedric and he started to panic. "He's not dead!" He sobbed out in some attempt at a yell. "He's not dead!"

The milling adults gave him pitying looks as most were directing the crowd to leave the area, Harry briefly noticing the presence of official looking aurors before his attention went to Madam Pomfrey as she smiled wearily, "no, he's not dead." (*That's great but that's not really what he meant...*)

There was a loud relieved cry from Amos Diggory, and Harry moved to say *something* to alleviate this pressure on his heart but

Dumbledore stilled him with a grim look. "You were very lucky Harry, if we hadn't gotten the warning the aurors wouldn't have been able to show up at the cemetery in time."

Harry still felt confused, his head spinning before an old hand was placed on his shoulder. He settled, partly for the comfort, but another part of him latently aware of the fragility of that hand and wondering if any movement would accidentally break it...like Cedric's bones had broken...like the blood had so easily come forth from his skull...like the knife had made it flow so profusely from his arm.

He choked on a sob and then he was suddenly gripped firmly in the hands of McGonagall, her stern eyes looking at him directly and taking away his will to fight, to *speak*. She pursed her lips and nodded her head before she muttered something to Dumbledore and steered him away from the mess that had become of the triwizard tournament.

He stared in some shock as they passed Mme. Pomfrey, delicately but efficiently escorting Cedric to the rest wards, and he swallowed down the blood from his bitten tongue as they walked into the halls of Hogwarts and then met at the doors to the healing ward, Harry spotting Cedric already sleeping on a far bed with curtains almost drawn completely shut- his father was there at his side.

Harry looked away, distracting himself with thoughts of all the passages the nurse had to know to get here so quickly.

His eyes swept over the sterile and unfeeling room to land on Neville, standing at a bedside and speaking with exaggerated facial expressions, Harry wondered why until he noticed who he was talking to. Even though there was no one to disturb with a loud conversation it really didn't matter to if one talked loudly to her, but it did matter what it *looked* like you were saying.

Hermione Granger was perched upon a bed, the white blanket wrapped around her until she was practically lost in it with only wide eyes and large hair visible accompanied by the small hands holding hot chocolate.

Neville smiled and rubbed her back soothingly, the girl lighting up and sipping at her drink before she spotted him and her eyes widened.

Neville looked over and gave him a quiet look before he smiled and called out, "You alright there, Harry?"

He pushed his even more broken glasses up his nose and nodded, his mouth opening to question them before he was nudged in the back and started walking to the pair, knowing that his head of house was going to talk to the school nurse and simply realizing that it was hard to hold a conversation across a medical ward.

"Hey guys." He said tiredly as he stopped near the bedside, watching the pair sit together and comfort each other. His brows furrowed, he could have sworn that they had been at the stands in the beginning of the tournament.

Neville smiled shyly, "Hermione figured it out."

Said girl was staring at him and trying to figure out what he was saying, but Neville made no move to inform her and she bit her lip before going back to her cocoa. She shifted and Neville absently steadied her while staring at him.

"She figured out what?"

"She noticed what was up and went to warn the teachers." Neville muttered something before looking up with a steely gaze. "She had some trouble getting help because no one really understands her when she's talking fast or using sign language."

Harry grew more confused, if that was so then how could she have warned them in time? The way he said it Hermione had only realized what was happening during the maze... "She wouldn't have done it in time for the aurors to arrive when they did..."

Neville smiled and let his head tilt discreetly to his friend. "Yeah, but then she got so frustrated she used her time turner." He grinned sheepishly, "I don't know if I was more surprised to see myself walking to the tournament or that she actually was allowed to use one."

Harry gaped before things started to click rapidly into place.

“You mean she got the aurors to come because she went back in time? She did that for me? She helped save Cedric...?” That meant she could have been the one to save Sirius...

The events of his third year were chaotic and very draining for young Harry, discovering a tie to someone who was set to die because he had been framed for his parents’ death- he had walked with the executioner and Headmaster only to watch them open the locked door into a shockingly empty room at the top of a lonely tower.

That also helped explain the missing Buckbeak.

And Sirius had contacted him later with a vague explanation....

Neville bristled and straightened, his eyes lighting up with the Gryffindor fire Harry hadn’t seen in the timid boy before. “Hermione did wonderfully!”

Harry’s eyes widened and he raised his hands up in surrender, stammering out to avoid this misunderstanding. “I meant that ...you should...she could have...Cedric almost died and he’s not dead!”

Neville was looking at him with wide eyes and Hermione had turned a curious and wary face to them, her hands slowly placing her cocoa on the side table before she was turning back to them and gently grabbing their hands to lower them from their tense positions.

She pursed her lips before she smiled, and as she shifted to face them more directly Harry noticed the bruise on her arm and the faint rip on her lip. He startled and made half a move to raise himself up before he was aware of their startled glances and Hermione’s timid removal of her hand.

“Are you okay?”

Her eyes widened before crinkling in a smile and her hand rose to cover her laugh. A slow smile spread over Neville’s face and he took a hand to brush aside one unruly curl as it fell to cover her face due to her laughter. “I am, but are you?” She spoke softly, her eyes searching his and he wondered if she *knew-knew*; she seemed like she did.

He wasn't dead.

Harry shook his head and gave her another worried look, Neville grinning before he spoke up.

"She's fine. The person who orchestrated this found out she was foiling his plan..." he gave a particularly proud glance to her though it was underlined with a soft caring worry. "I got there in time to see her claw at his eye and then I stunned him."

Harry felt himself smiling for the first time in a while, Hermione glancing up with her eyes closed and a grin on her face before the door to the ward slid open and the Ravenclaw who escorted Victor Krum to the ball floated in.

"Luna!" Neville exclaimed with a quick pat to Hermione's arm to get her attention. The female Gryffindor lit up when she spotted the absentminded blonde; Luna smiled her usual dreamy smile and made her way to them.

"They skies were very angry today, they didn't like what happened."

Neville grinned. "Hermione wasn't either. But she did something about it."

Luna nodded solemnly with her large glowing eyes. "Of course, the clouds can only do so much." She turned to the curly haired brunette, meeting her happy gold eyes. "They say they're proud of you. Not many would notice the evil and then go one step further to stop it."

Harry found himself floundering, discovering that the odd way Luna spoke wasn't slow and exaggerated but enunciated enough that Hermione had no trouble 'listening'. Neville tapped him to get his attention before he whispered to keep from interrupting the girls. "It's called lip speaking; Luna knows it because she thinks the White bellied Saddleback understands it better than normal speech."

Harry looked at Neville in wonder before he looked nonplussed at the girls. "She's just speaking normal ...but it's different."

Neville nodded his head, absently glancing over to the girls when Hermione laughed behind her hand and Luna smiled dazedly. "Lip speaking is emphasizing visual cues to help tell what words are being spoken- I use cued speech instead."

"Is that what you were doing with your hand?"

Neville gave him a sharp look, and it took Harry a moment to realize that he'd given away part of his secret- they didn't know he'd seen them talking before he'd actually 'found out'.

He'd successfully avoided being found out, and only started to talk to Neville about the maze and any help he might offer- the chapter on gillyweed in that book had been a lifesaver, literally. He'd been surprised to meet up with Neville *and* Hermione- not having any ulterior motives of the sort at that point in time He'd simply wanted to survive the last task. And it had started quietly, with Neville translating the quiet Hermione's insistence on locator spells and meditation.

That had started a tentative friendship, though Neville and Hermione only informed them of Hermione's hearing difficulties when Neville took the first step and made some hand signs in front of him. They were more open after that, but they still only used sign language.

And now the kneazle was out of the bag.

Neville stood angrily and drew the attention of both girls over to them, Hermione stumbling to her feet dizzily because of her rush and unsteady condition before Luna steadied her with confused wide eyes. Harry stood, the guilty weight on his shoulders making him hunch like he'd been prone to do in the summer, trying to make himself as small as possible to avoid the hit.

Luna laughed a little watery giggle, sounding quite like the babbling brook he'd seen in a wizarding picture before Hermione smiled and looked at her friend. Neville spluttered before he deflated, regarding Harry with a cautious air but none of his previous hostility.

Harry gaped at the mercurial shift before he quickly sobered. His eyes darting around the room – catching the Diggory's solemn corner and wincing – spotting the bedside potions where Hermione had

been and scowling – looking at the trio regarding him with varying looks from caution to dreamy observation to open and welcoming curiosity.

He sighed and scratched the back of his head, hunching over to accommodate the movement- he hated it when he did that. The action was so like the little boy in hand-me-down clothes too large for him to move properly in, waiting for someone to smack him across the head for getting the question wrong or spilling the juice.

Luna walked up and gave him a hug. “Even the clouds have a little trouble avoiding the sun.”

Harry sputtered before he blushed, Neville sighing before he let go and laughed, his hands mopping down his face before he gave him an obscure look and spoke. “Hermione’s special, Harry, and the first thing I thought when you said that was that you were just playing with us to find out everything.”

Harry gasped and stumbled to attention as he looked directly into Neville’s face, and he slowly grew awed as he saw why the sorting hat had placed the last Longbottom in Gryffindor. He slowly shook his head, his mouth opening before he closed it because he had to swallow that heavy feel at the back of his throat. “I- I really wanted to get to know you.”

Neville pressed his lips into a line as he winced and rubbed the back of his neck (once again, that all too familiar gesture to Harry). “You got to admit Harry; no one really wants to get to know us.”

Luna tilted her head, her eyes on the corner of the room where the Diggory’s were, though the curtains were closed and there was nothing to actually look at. She was strange like that, looking nowhere and everywhere at once and randomly speaking out of turn...

And Neville, he bumbled his way through the school and lost his homework almost as much as he lost his pet toad, and the parchment didn’t have a set of legs to run away on.

Hermione crinkled up her nose at them, her eyes laughing before she gave them an exasperated look and Neville started laughing. She

didn't understand. She couldn't hear them arguing and accusing and she simply accepted them because they accepted her.

Like no one else did.

But he *wanted* to get to know them.

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Hermione sobbed as they caught her by her hair, she hadn't waited long enough and they had found her today. Her binder was tossed aside and broken - someone had stepped on it – and one of her hands had been smashed into the loose stones on the sidewalk and she could feel the stinging sensation of blood and dirt mixing.

She sobbed again and tried to sit up, the hold on her hair tightening before her face was forced into the gravel and someone kicked her knees out from under her as she tried to get up again. She cried out as someone stepped on her hand; her fingers were going numb as she pulled it back frantically and curled it into her chest, tears choking her as they flowed into her mouth and the pressure blocked her throat while she tried to get away from the stupid kids who always picked on her.

There was a flurry of movement in front of her blurry eyes, the kids' laughter was loud and their shouts deafening as she tried to get away from harsh hands and jeers. She screamed out for someone to help, but as usual there was no one and no one would bother later.

They kicked her school bag away and the first actual punch was thrown, a hard knuckle catching her in the eye as her breath caught in her chest- her form swayed in the hold of two other boys. There was more laughter, harsh and grating as her vision blurred with swelling and some more sticky tears, her hands trying to steady herself and push away her attackers at the same time.

There was a kick to her side, knocking the rest of her breath out of her lungs as her eyes widened and she choked on some blood from her bitten tongue. Another kick, a blur of someone pulling her hair back for someone else to punch her, and then her head was being shoved into the paved sidewalk.

There was a crack and she struggled with disorientation, the vague forms of the boys stopped what they were doing, a blurry sensation of them backing away. Hermione choked and then collapsed from where she'd managed to levy herself up, her throat heaving as blood and acid came up and she cried, trying to find her balance around the pounding of her head and the numbness of her beaten limbs.

Then adult hands had hold of her, and her head lolled back so she could see her teacher, Mr. Fairleigh, as his mouth moved and his angry eyes looked away from her and her struggling.

She settled into his arms as he stroked her messy hair away from her sticky face, her eyelids wavering with the call to sleep as the cocoon of silence surrounded her.

Author's Note:

Neville is using Cued Speech. This is a language aid where the speaker uses a very small variety of hand signs to represent consonant and vowel sounds while speaking so that *hard of hearing* people can pronounce the word themselves. In Hermione's case she has a linguistic background – she has post-lingual deafness - so she can understand the sounds and work to pronounce them even though she is completely deaf. (She's also a genius, so forgive my exaggeration of her abilities :grins:.)

PS: Since I got a pitiful response...ahem...I will post as soon as I get a certain number of hits. Apparently reviewing is overrated. Personally I like getting/giving feedback- you guys might want to try it so I don't feel like I'm posting to obscurity.

Chapter 3

“She’s such a strong girl.” Luna spoke dreamily, her eyes wandering over the room before resting on the working Hermione.

Harry snorted at the random comment, quickly sobering himself before he regarded Hermione and then turned to Luna as Neville pointed out a passage in a book to their deaf friend. Certainly Hermione stood up tall with her difference, a light seemed to cling to her as if she was a unique race all on her own and softly proud of it...but that was just her adapting like any other human, right? She had developed that aura because she needed to be seen that way-competent and intelligent and ...strong.

Instead of pondering further he smiled at Luna and gave her a bemused look.

She smiled vaguely in return, the bottle caps of her earrings clinking oddly as she swung her head to some tune. “She’s struggling so hard to work on fitting in, and she’s probably so tired of seeing medics and doctors. I think she should be worried about Carnlots...she’s in the hospital wing enough to catch them- they only take to familiar patients you know.”

Harry sighed and shook his head, he didn’t know after all. Wait- “Why does Hermione need to go to the nurse all the time?”

Luna whispered a giggle. “Kids are so mean.”

Harry scrunched his nose and left it at that. Luna was odd at the best of times, anything other than that was near undecipherable. And he didn’t think his brain could handle the multiple layers present in Luna-speak right now. *(He wasn’t sure if he could handle it most any other time either.)*

The four of them were meeting in the library to study for their charms exam coming up, and Harry had crammed as much information in his brain as he could - Hermione was a well spring of odd facts that strangely helped – now he didn’t have any power or energy left to contemplate the ambiguous blonde he tentatively called friend.

He had finished some flying with Ron; talked to him and Ginny for a while, and then slipped out to meet the group at the library in that corner stack they loved so much. He briefly felt guilty over how he avoided introducing them to his friends....but weren't *they* his friends as well? Didn't it work both ways? Was he embarrassed of Ron and Ginny? For him to think that, did it mean he was embarrassed of the odd trio?

He looked down at his scratchy notes, examining the difference between his writing and the cursive side notes Hermione had written for him as hints to remember the topic- little anagrams, some rhymes as well as those acronyms...and some other mnemonic devices he'd never seen or used before.

He smiled as he spotted the little smiley face at the bottom of the page next to 'Good luck'.

He looked up to watch a confused Hermione speak to an equally confused Neville, her occasionally heavy spoken word accenting her sign language and the boy's scratching of his head as he drew diagrams on the parchment and they tried to overcome their language barrier in that moment.

He watched them with sad eyes, wondering how they had become friends in the first place when they so clearly shied away from large crowds and other people- maybe they had run into each other while hiding in some corner. He shook his head.

Luna laughed and interrupted his thoughts as she helped Neville... "Hermione meant that the *protego* comes from the latin words 'for all' and 'cover'; but various meanings give it different connotations."

Hermione held up her hand and performed a quick word, Luna's eyes lighting up before she spoke clearly: "Connotation."

Neville brightened and turned to Hermione, grabbing her attention before using cued speech around his neck as he also repeated the word and their friend's face brightened. Neville spoke and continued his hand movements, "also nuance, undertone..."

Hermione laughed behind her hands (mouthing the word delicately) before quickly turning their attention to something else, she nodded and signed again. Harry watched Luna light up brighter than her usual foggy haze- "It really means that? I thought they would loosely mean the same thing."

Neville turned questioning eyes to Luna, a soft light to him as he smiled and waited. She simply smiled in response and waited for Hermione to finish signing. "Hermione said that because of modern meanings, the spell alters to focus on the casters interpretation- so if you use the suffix 'pro' to mean 'favored' or 'for all' or any other depends on your view of what the suffix contains and if your magic can conform to that direction."

Harry laughed a little oddly before he shook his head and smiled- he should really stop being surprised by her. It was sometimes hard to mesh the image of tired defenseless Hermione with this stunningly brilliant young girl who completely disregarded the box she was put in by wizarding society.

Harry wondered if looking at it from a muggle's perspective had changed her view on magic...or maybe that was just the way she was. Certainly no other muggleborn he knew of thought so deeply about their subjects. Despite the fact that the wizarding world had labeled her unfit to learn their ways because of her heritage; she seemed to eclipse them all as she understood it.

He felt a sort of pride in his chest- though he didn't know why it would be so. He wasn't responsible for any of her accomplishments and they weren't the best of friends- though Neville and Luna quickly accepted him. They were warm and welcoming, but Hermione seemed stilted in his presence and she never seemed to talk to him directly.

He wondered if that was his fault.

.....

He sat beside her on the rock, overlooking the lake as he fiddled and tried to find a way to communicate. Luna had her lip speech with fluency in sign language and Neville had that cued speech and some

sign language...Harry hadn't really wondered how he would talk to her on his own. It was also awkward considering how long they'd actually known each other. Was it after Christmas when he'd finally joined her and Neville? Surely nothing could account for the way everything felt so unrecognizable when he was near her- like he shouldn't speak because she would misinterpret him or that he shouldn't sign because he would do it wrong...like he didn't *know* her.

He sighed and watched her hum to herself (off tune) - he smiled ruefully and then waved his hand to get her attention. She turned to him with guarded but welcoming eyes. He took in a deep breath-making sure to think out his sentence clearly before he bothered uttering it. "I never did thank you."

She blinked and then smiled, her hands quickly coming up to her mouth to cover her laugh. One of her hands detached to wave dismissively, and her eyes twinkled at him before she was shifting and holding her knees as she looked at him- as she was prone to stare directly at a person so she could understand them. She pursed her lips before loosening them, "I was happy to help."

Harry smiled and then watched her twiddle her fingers and happily get distracted with the lake, her eyes widening when the squid raised a tentacle to wave and then she grinned and waved back. Harry laughed.

She looked over at him to figure out why he was shaking, but when she saw him laughing she pursed her lips and raised one eyebrow before smiling and smacking him across his arm.

He sobered and leaned back to watch her more intently, looked at slight scars on her hands and the freckles across her nose, watched her eyes widen and brighten before narrowing in playful suspicion, smiled as she wrinkled her nose and stuck out her tongue. "It's rude to stare." She spoke slowly in her heavy voice, staring at him and winking at the hypocrisy of *her* stating that. Her face cleared as she noticed his solemn air.

She was the only one he'd met that had ever done that- Ginny and Ron far too uncomfortable with his brooding to attempt facing it so they usually ended up joking and ignoring him while he drifted into

deeper thoughts (Trying to joke him out of his mood he was sure, but not everything worked like that. Especially when mothers and family and life came into his thoughts and they weren't things he liked to take lightly.).

Hermione didn't bother with any of that- if you were serious there was a good reason, and she paid attention to you and asked about it and worried for you. She also seemed to be more sensitive to it, more readily able to change her mood to comfort him if he needed it. And they weren't yet what he would call close friends.

He licked his lips unsurely before he leaned closer to her and spoke- knowing that it made no difference except to create a greater feeling of privacy. "I don't know how I can talk to you without messing up. I feel like an idiot every time I want to tell you something and can't."

Hermione's eyes angled to a more sympathetic slant, her mouth open as she watched him and then she smiled softly. "You know Harry, I used to talk all the time; it's not as if I can't speak at all."

Harry tilted his head and narrowed his eyes as he looked at her. Her voice echoing in his head, scolding him for thinking she would believe he was an idiot. He stared back at her, wondering if she was as comfortable under his stare as he was under hers- because he knew she wouldn't judge him. He swallowed, "Then why don't you?"

She relaxed further into her seated position, her muscles going lax and her face going wry. "You *can* hear my voice right?" She sighed and looked away quickly, her eyes darting to him so she could still maintain contact. "It makes people uncomfortable."

Harry flinched back like he'd been struck, and Hermione turned to him slowly with an understanding light. Harry grimaced, "But you speak beautifully."

Her eyes widened and she blushed, a little smile making its way out of her lips before she rushed to cover her mouth. Harry's hands stopped her from covering it up, and he smiled and tilted his head to her in silent challenge. She smiled broader and laughed freely.

"You laugh just fine too."

"Harry, thank you."

.....

Hermione sat as still as she could as she watched the boys approach her parents, their bodies slumped as they glanced awkwardly around and their own parents watched with a stunned disapproval- trying not to look at the child their own had injured so greatly.

The large court room was elegant with wood and the proper looking judge, but Hermione wasn't comfortable in such a large place with all these people. It was even harder to watch her parents weep and talk to the boys who had caused all this trouble. Certainly they were going to be punished, but Hermione wondered if it would ever be the same.

It was hard for her to look for things she normally took no note of; but now she had to notice if someone's eyes darted about, if their lips moved in a sound she couldn't hear anymore. And no one liked to meet her eyes as she stared.

And she stared as the boys choked on apologies and they tried not to shake when they spotted her sitting in her corner as serene as she usually was in the class room, hands folded neatly in her lap as she stared and stared and stared.

When they were done only one approached her, and she took note of his shoulders rising with a steeling breath and his chin tilting up even as his eyes watched his feet as they shuffled in her direction. She tilted her head as she stared at him, when he stopped in front of her, at the way his hands fumbled before he took out a wrinkled letter and handed it to her, his eyes finally rising to meet hers as her hands took the paper but her eyes stayed on his.

He swallowed hard and his shoulders shook- his eyes bright with tears as he watched her in return. He licked his lips and then pursed them, his face crumbling as he reached out to gently touch the bandage at her temple. He looked down briefly before he was looking back up at her. "It was supposed to be a joke."

She saw the rush of movement that was her angry father lunging for the boy, but her mother had caught him as he steamed and the other

parents shook and trembled, their little children cowering and weeping as they watched and wondered. Her mother quickly made a sign to her, and Hermione's eyes lit with understanding before she returned all her focus on the boy- his name was Jack Robins, and he liked the dumplings his mother made him for lunch.

Hermione leaned forward slightly and moved her hands to cup his cheeks, looking straight into his eyes and watching as he struggled not to move away from her stare. She could see the purple of regret and the dark blue of sorrow, and she wondered if she had seen that misty color before because it was so familiar to her- she knew exactly what it was. But she smiled and nodded her head, her eyes large and still intent as she opened her lips and hoped she had enough control to make words she couldn't even hear anymore: "It wasn't very funny, but that's okay."

The boy choked and fell to his knees, her hands still on his face as she wondered why he cried when she had just forgiven him. The boy was drawn away by a tired man who had his eyes, and she watched as he was taken to a weepy woman who stood and fretted with her handkerchief and drew him into a hug before he was at arms length and under a scolding but misty-proud glare.

Hermione tilted her head and sighed, her shoulders feeling the brush of her shirt as she returned her hands to her lap and swung her legs.

She didn't know why they worried. Even with her loss everything else was so much clearer.

AN: I could finally upload my document- there's been a spot of trouble in that area recently, so yay! Here you guys go, even if I was set to post it last week.

PS: I have to point out some more exaggeration on my part, but going along the lines of Hermione being a genius and learning early I think I can be forgiven. Usually completely deaf people can not speak quite so clearly that everyone will be able to understand them- I made it so Hermione can communicate if she's calm and thinks about what she's saying. It's not quite being mute...think of it more like a very thick

accent, and slurring words together when she's rushed because she can't exactly hear what she's saying to people.

Though, maybe, I have Pomfrey and her doing something....you'll not know until later now will you?

Chapter 4

Harry grinned as he entered the common room, finally away from all the curious and dubious students with their excitement about the end of the term. It was nearly overwhelming for him to be under such heavy scrutiny from kids younger than him, to be doubted and ridiculed because they believed he'd simply attacked Cedric in the maze.

No, no dark lord here, no sir.

Harry snorted and then his eyes were drawn to the couch in front of the fireplace, easily spotting the fiery orange of Hermione's cat as it reclined and purred loudly under her gentle fingers.

Harry tilted his head to watch the way Hermione had stretched herself out and laid with Crookshanks, touching his nose and gently batting at his paws as the cat squirmed and tried to lick her fingers. Hermione was smiling openly in the empty common room, and he approached with his own grin as he realized this was why no one ever saw her...she came when no one was around and left to hide when everyone was. She was good at remaining undetected, and it was a skill he wished he possessed at the moment.

He huffed and flopped down onto the couch, watching the cat stop and bat at him- Hermione turning at the change to spot him and smile again. Her hands absently continued playing with her cat who gave him a guarded look before swatting at her hand with more purpose as he kept his claws back and Hermione waited for him to speak.

Harry got it, Hermione was Crookshank's for the moment.

"It's really annoying to walk down the halls, so I came to relax."

She smiled. "But no one bothers you."

He snorted. "Instead they skirt around me and whisper behind my back."

Her expression grew thoughtful. "They are quite frightened, and with the media and their parents they don't know what to believe."

"I don't ever remember being as frightened as some of those first years." Harry scratched his head and made a face as he spoke, looking at Hermione to watch her raise an eyebrow and levy herself up from her reclining position.

She tilted her lips up in a wry smile, her eyes kind as she leaned closer to him and gave him all her attention. "I think we all were."

And she continued looking at him, all her being focused to understand him and speak with him. He had grown used to that as he slowly became her friend- and he found he liked the way it told him she was interested in what he had to say, that she would try to *hear* him even if she didn't understand. He didn't comprehend how people found her stare unnerving...it only showed how much she wanted to be connected to you.

"But we had friends; we stuck together and went in together and weren't so...fidgety."

She covered her mouth to laugh.

He gave her a wide eyed look before he fought his smile (he really didn't know what was funny) as he gestured and tried to explain. "I mean it, the first years all avoid me and the other guys, like we're going to roar at them. I remember going after anyone who hurt our friend...we stood up for ourselves."

"They are lucky to have you; I don't think anyone would have stood up for me like you did for your friends in that 'frightening' first year."

Harry watched her pause to contemplate her next sentence, and he wondered if that was why Ginny was his friend- they were connected because he had protected her. He shifted and winced at a particularly sharp spring on the couch, but he simply moved away from it and then spoke. "But Neville is really close to you, I don't doubt he'd even roar at Snape if you were in trouble."

Harry didn't doubt that; Neville was insanely protective of Hermione, and Luna was too- in her own vague manner.

She laughed, her hands almost coming up to cover her mouth before she just let it be. "Neville became my friend after Halloween, but that was just because we ran into each other at the medical ward." She covered her mouth to giggle. "He was so clumsy he stood up just to fall down again." Her eyes softened in fond remembrance, and then she smiled widely at him.

Harry felt his eyes widen as he clicked this into place- it had only been a rumor that a young first year had been caught by the troll, people had dismissed it since no one was telling hero stories or gossiping. He winced as he realized no one had asked Hermione about it because everyone thought her a pretentious snob in their first year, not responding to their calls for her attention, it was later that they'd all learned to ignore her- she had simply accepted this and drifted off on her own.

"What about Luna?"

Hermione smiled and leaned back as she looked at him, her eyes bright and smiling as her nose crinkled in amusement. "Neville actually ran into her, and then I stumbled over the pair of them and we ended up in a pile."

Harry gaped at her and then laughed, his side hurting at the abrupt movement before he was smiling softly and tilting his head to watch her.

She blushed. "We had to run around to sort all our stuff out, and I had no idea what was going on so Neville had to explain it to me." She sighed and her shoulders shifted with the weight, her eyes guilty as she thought of her past confusion (Harry winced, wondering if other people had accused her of being a worthless bother like they had him). "Turns out some students had kicked our stuff further down the hall, but Luna practically pounced on me when she saw us using sign language- she wanted to make sure she had her grammar right. She is in Ravenclaw for a reason, you know." She smiled and tilted her head, letting it rest lazily upon her shoulder. "We missed our classes trying to get all our books sorted out, but Luna was our friend after that."

Harry swallowed and looked down at his hands as they fidgeted, his eyebrows furrowing as he held in the urge to go and maim some students for causing so much trouble, and yell at the other students for ignoring the trio just because of their differences.

Harry tensed his fingers before he concentrated on loosening his muscles, looking down at the blood rushing back and returning color as he thought and bit the side of his tongue.

Would he have kept on doing that if he hadn't seen them in the library?

Hermione looked down to Crookshanks as he batted her hand, and then her attention turned to her watch face before her face grew solemn and she stood. "I have to go now Harry, I have a meeting with Mme. Pomfrey soon." And then she gave him a smile. "I know it will work out for you- you're too nice, they'll get over it eventually."

.....

Harry took a deep breath and smiled, his teeth clenched together with his worry as he waved Ron and Ginny over and they gave him quizzical looks, already close to the train so there was no need to move away and then need to rush to get on later. But they complied easily enough and trotted over to him as he led them to the trio.

Ginny gasped and drew up short, her mouth open as her wide brown eyes stared at Luna and then Neville (she fidgeted uncomfortably) and then focused with pursed lips on Hermione.

Ron twitched his nose and tilted his head in a rather oblivious way, but then he grinned easily and blushed as he looked at Luna. The girl responded serenely by drifting forward, introducing herself in her odd way, and then smiling.

Ginny glowered with a skeptical face before shrugging and introducing herself in return. Harry sighed, watching Neville step up and smile charmingly at Ginny (in that fumbling, too clumsy to *not* be adorable, way of his- or so Hermione had told him) before shaking Ron's hand and returning to Hermione's side. Harry tilted his head as easy banter erupted, Ron fumbling and joking as he was prone to do

and Ginny welcoming but suspicious as was her habit since her first year- though he watched her narrow her eyes at Hermione in an entirely too hostile manner.

Harry laughed at Hermione's bewilderment and broke the tension, causing Ron to blush- as he'd been stammering (and consequently thought that was what he had been laughing at) before they were roughhousing- though now Neville joined in and Luna made the odd stray comment from the side.

Hermione eventually pulled Neville away and protected him behind her, teeth white and flashing in a smile as Neville stuck out his tongue and laughed while hugging her. Ron stumbled to a halt in front of her, his grin cheeky as he stuck out his tongue in return and moved to stand between Luna and his sister.

Neville shifted to stand beside Hermione and actively started a conversation about the dragons- Hermione shifted more away from the group to be able to see all of them easily as their comments came faster and her eyes darted about.

Harry watched his two old friends talk with these three unique individuals, and he watched Hermione try to watch them all and pretend she understood; her form tense as she stayed quiet and humble just at the edges of their little group.

He sighed and rubbed the back of his head before he caught himself and lowered his hand, making his way over to her to stand solidly by her side as he halfheartedly listened to the conversation around them, the background murmur of students yelling last minute messages before they boarded the train to go to King's Cross.

She glanced to him with a surprised face, and he smiled lightly at the way her expressions were always so vibrant and animated - it was another result of her struggling to communicate and create connections with people who would have trouble understanding her. So when he smiled and she responded by softening her eyes in gratitude and lifting the corners of her lips in a soft smile he didn't have to hear her say anything- her expression said it all for her, and Harry understood her enough to understand.

...

The train compartment they claimed was filled with murmured conversations livened up by Luna's stray comments and Neville's fumbling (Luna's eyes remained firmly on her upside down magazine as Ginny giggled and talked to her about girly things). Neville was busy showing Ron his pet toad, the wary amphibian struggling with his slimy legs to get out of the firm grip and hop away as he usually did.

"How did you start hanging out with Harry?" Ron questioned in his usual oblivious way, missing the way that Neville narrowed his eyes at him and Luna finally tore her eyes away from her magazine to look their way.

But Neville shook his head and sighed bemusedly. "I helped him with a few things this year, and he started studying with us." He vaguely gestured to the trio, and Harry watched Hermione light up as she followed his careful speech.

Ginny turned her attention to him, and Neville blushed under her scrutiny and shifted more into his seat. "You actually helped Harry out?"

Hermione gave a particularly dark look, and Harry smiled and watched as Neville straightened, "I was the one that gave him Gillyweed."

Ginny's mouth formed an 'o' and then she blushed, her eyes darting back to Luna and starting up a frantic conversation to cover up her folly. Ron looked between them with confusion before rolling his eyes and shrugging, realizing he had caught Harry's attention and mouthing 'mad' with great exaggeration.

Hermione stifled her giggle beside him.

Harry finally relaxed into his seat, his breath whooshing out as nothing had exploded yet and everything seemed to be going pretty well. Hermione moved beside him, he looked up to find her worried eyes intent on him before they crinkled into a smile upon finding he was alright.

He grinned, because he was alright. His friends were getting along and they hadn't started any bitter conversation while drawing him into the middle or calling him in on his acquaintances. And it felt great.

Now he didn't feel that he had to hide his friends away from each other, the trio cloistered in the library or the Weasley's kept away from his studying. He didn't have to hide the fact that he enjoyed talking to Luna and roughing about with Neville, or that he was good friends with the quietest girl in their year.

Yeah, definitely alright.

.....

Hermione scowled as she returned home from her new school, throwing her book bag into the hallway wall as she stormed up the stairs and hit the walls on her way up. She was startled to come face to face with her father, and her feet faltered on the top step before he was pulling her into a hug and she was bursting into tears and clinging to him like she used to when she was so much younger and he could do anything- when he would do anything because he still listened and had the time.

He stroked her hair and his lips moved against her temple, the color around him fogging into existence as a calming warm gold and caring green. She choked and snuggled her cold nose into his shoulder, wondering if he would understand her when she was so worked up.

She pulled away and looked at him with watery eyes, and he smiled at her before sitting down upon the top step and pulling her to sit across his lap. His arms wrapped around her in a hug before his eyes were unblinking to watch her and wait for her to start.

She gave him a watery smile before she started with the simple things, telling about her day and how the boys were being mean again and the girls kept on ignoring her. Then she hesitated, and Daddy's eyes softened before he caught her hands and brought them to his mouth to kiss her knuckles, smiling gently as he rubbed the little scratch on her thumb from the briar patch out back. She took in a deep breath and continued.

Daddy didn't like hearing about how the teachers didn't want her using sign language, and he scowled as she told them about how they refused to use any language aids to help her. His eyes started getting wet when she told him how she was struggling to read lips when they didn't bother facing her; how the textbooks weren't up to date and didn't help her understand what she couldn't hear.

Dad whispered her name, something so pleasantly easy to recognize because it was so strange, "we'll talk to the school." He made a tentative attempt at the signs as he spoke (it was a habit for him to speak and sign, like it used to be for her before she realized people didn't like the sound of her voice), and she smiled and laughed out a little watery giggle before she was hugging him and speaking around a thick tongue.

"Thank you, Daddy."

Chapter 5

They arrived at the train station calmly, their trunks with them as they waited to be picked up- it was only Ron and Ginny who had family already there waiting for them, and they were nice enough to stay with them to wait for the other guardians.

Suddenly Luna was accosted into a big hug, her face lighting up as she giggled and was spun around. Neville and Ginny grinned, sharing a sweet look before they both blushed and looked the other way. Harry watched Hermione tilt her head and widen her eyes, the brown melting like the good chocolate that Remus had given him.

Mr. Lovegood turned to be introduced... "Hello, you must be Ronald and Ginevra Weasley, Luna has told me about you- Weasley Red she calls it, and now I can see why, she's absolutely correct." Luna smiled at her father as the two siblings blushed. He turned to the two remaining as Harry tensed. "And you, Harry Potter, you did excellent at the tournament, shame it had to end with all that wicked interference." He shook his head as if he honestly believed Harry about Voldemort and the Death Eaters and the graveyard, and the boy gaped before a quirky smile found its way onto his mouth- he was just like his daughter.

Finally, he turned to Hermione. Abruptly he stopped and gaped at her; Luna calmly and sympathetically patting his arm as he tried to form words into a sentence. "Hermione Granger! What a pleasure to finally meet you!" Hermione narrowed her eyes and blushed, trying to keep up with his rapid speech. Harry shifted slightly closer to her, protective all of a sudden, before Luna whispered into her father's ear and he waved her off. "Quite right; quite right. Sorry dear. I've heard so much about you. Brightest student of your year and muggleborn to boot! Luna speaks so highly of you...being the first to help her find her things and all."

Hermione smiled and finally took his hand, shaking it firmly as he smiled and laughed. They chattered a bit before Neville's grandma called him over, his shoulders slumping before Hermione hugged him and smiled for a second- he was grinning as he set off. Luna was

drawn away by her equally absent minded father- almost going back onto the train instead of out the portal before they managed to find their way.

Harry grinned as Ginny drew her eyebrows together in confused amusement and Ron scratched his head. Hermione simply looked around at the crowd, and Harry thought to help her except he had no clue what her parents looked like.

"So, where'd you meet that bird?" Ron asked blithely, ignoring the look Ginny shot him for the metaphor. "She's right off her trolley."

Harry glared before he laughed a little, unable to deny the oddness of Luna though now he found it endearing. "Luna's a Ravenclaw who studies with us. Hermione introduced her."

Their attention was suddenly on the quiet lion beside him, her back to them as she searched through the crowd for her parents.

Ginny cleared her throat. "So how'd you meet Luna?" Hermione didn't respond, and Ginny's eyes narrowed at the affront before Harry hastily tapped his friend on the arm and directed her attention to the fiery redhead. She gave them an innocently inquiring look that did little to still Ginny's ire and she spoke in a tight voice. "How did you meet Luna?"

Hermione tilted her head to think, and she brightened before opening her mouth to speak. Harry smiled to encourage her if needed- but they were interrupted by a shout of a name-

"Hermione! There she is!"

Harry and the two redheads looked over to the side, a confused Hermione following their gazes before she lit up like Luna had- brilliantly. Her arm waved before a large man was suddenly beside them, laughing with worried tears in his eyes as he held his daughter at arms length and quickly looked her over for injury. Harry shifted slightly, wondering why that was his first response instead of the tender hug she was pulled into right after. A smiling woman came over and gently stroked the hair back from Hermione's face- her hazel eyes liquid as she kissed her temple and stood off to the side, a

hand firmly resting on Hermione's shoulder as if to make sure she stayed there.

Harry felt his temple pierce with the thought that came, but he shook his head and stepped forward. "Mr. and Mrs. Granger?"

They turned to him as one, Hermione, by default, glancing at him with her curiosity due to the shift of her father's stance. "Yes, young man?"

Harry wondered why it sounded like a curse.

"My name's Harry Potter, I met Hermione this year."

Mr. Granger drew up, his brows lowering over darkened grey eyes even as his wife shushed him and gave him a tight smile. "She wrote us a letter about you, dear. We were very surprised to hear that she'd made a friend."

Ron and Ginny shifted suddenly, and Harry looked at them to find their stunned faces a mite affronted- he cleared his throat. "I was very surprised Hermione took a liking to me."

"Oh?" Mr. Granger's voice was dark. "Have you done something to my daughter?"

Harry shivered and actually had to tell himself to not take the step back; Ginny drew in closer to Ron. "I meant that Hermione already has two good friends, and it must be hard to make a new one when they don't understand anything." He shuffled a bit, "Hermione is very bright though, and um...she-"

Mr. Granger finally smiled; his face softening as his hold relaxed on his daughter and she looked up to him with a smile. He wrinkled his nose at her before sighing and signing with his hands in front of her face- so she wouldn't have to strain her neck to read his lips and facial expression. Hermione watched his hands closely, her visage pleasant and lips plumped with curiosity before she smiled and leaned further into her father.

Mrs. Granger laughed openly before nudging her husband in the arm with a loose fist, then using that same hand to put her hair behind her

ear and turn back to regard Harry. "Well, it was very nice to meet you Harry, but I believe Hermione needs a good plate of homemade biscuits with tea and a book." She winked at him and ruffled her daughter's hair. Hermione stood steadfast under the contact as she smiled contently- like Crookshanks when he was being petted.

Harry stammered a bit before he managed a complete sentence. "It was a pleasure to meet you Mrs. Granger, and you too Mr. Granger. I can't wait to hear from Hermione this summer."

Hermione beamed at him and her eyes crinkled, her mother smiling at him gently as she pulled her daughter away and into the crowd. Harry watched their hands tighten on each other as they disappeared into the rushing crowd, and then he sighed and turned to Mr. Granger.

His eyes were dark as he watched him closely, and Harry squirmed before he offered up a tentative smile. Mr. Granger sighed and then his face became amiable, his head tipping in acknowledgement before he stepped closer and leaned down to him to speak more clearly. "My daughter is very special Harry, and thank you for looking out for her...but if I ever hear of you doing something stupid and hurting her I *will* come after you- wizard or not."

Harry blinked and watched the man turn to leave, his green eyes wide and steady upon the man's broad back as his brain rapidly clicked to wade through all the possible things the large man could do to him; but then Harry wouldn't do anything to hurt her, Hermione was too special. Mr. Granger was just fiercely protective of his daughter ...and he wondered who had been the ones to hurt her before.

Ron shuffled. "I guess she's not that much of a nightmare at all. It's funny that she's so quiet though."

Harry shook his head and then looked at Ginny, scrutinizing her horrified face as she stared after the Granger family. Her eyes slowly went to him, and he watched her swallow, scrubbing her hands on her pants. Her skin was pale under her freckles, and the Weasley red of her hair stood out in stark contrast. She offered a weak smile, "I thought that...is she..." She looked down and fiddled with the hem of her shirt.

Ron scratched his head. "Yeah....Neville seems like a nice bloke, odd that he hangs out with her."

Ginny twitched and glared at her brother, but then her eyes softened and she turned back to Harry. "How far gone is her hearing?"

Ron stilled and slowly lowered his hand to regard him curiously, and Harry suddenly felt a weight on his shoulders as he wondered what he could tell and what should remain between Hermione and him- like a secret.

But he didn't want her to be kept like a secret. She was the greatest friend he had; she listened and worried and was so darn giving that he wondered what he'd done to deserve such caring.

"Hermione's completely deaf, but she does know how to speak."

Ginny nodded her head and her lips formed a thin line, her eyes drifting guiltily to the side. "I thought she was a rich witch. I mean, she's always so closed off- like she's better than all of us."

Ron shuffled and blushed at his ears. "I reckon we all thought that. She does come off as a snob."

Harry bristled and straightened his shoulders. "Hermione's wonderful, she's just quiet."

Ron snorted and put his hands behind his head. "Yeah Harry, quiet. So quiet we all thought she was mute. And that was before we were certain she thought she was better than us."

Ginny shook her head and bit her lip, her eyes large and pleading as she looked at him (Harry shifted uncomfortably). "I admit I ignored her because Ron said she was a right nightmare- and the one time I bumped into her and tried to apologize she didn't even respond to me."

Harry felt his jaw tense, and he focused on the feeling of the muscles in his neck shifting before he spoke. Talking with Hermione had taught him to think out everything he said before he actually spoke- so there could be no room for misunderstandings.

There had already been enough of those.

He swallowed and looked at them firmly. "Ron, do you remember our first year? The rest of us weren't the nicest to her in the first place, and then she ignored us when we tried to get her attention."

Ron's ears went red and he looked to the side. He rubbed his nose as he spoke, "It's not like we were *that* rude."

Harry's brows rose incredulously and he sighed. "Ron, the first thing we asked her was if she knew what she was doing on the train. Not exactly...tactful."

Ron flushed deeper as Ginny's mouth dropped.

Harry remembered the little girl from the train, inching her way down the hall and peering into compartments. When she'd stepped into theirs and looked at the full seats she'd given them a tight smile and moved to step out- but she'd looked so lost Harry had felt bad for having his things spread out and taking up all the room.

"What are you doing?"

Her eyes glared at Ron as she stood there, tense, before she scowled and quickly closed the door behind her as she left.

Ron shrugged and spoke around a mouthful of pastry. "A little crazy, that one."

Ginny looked between them, her mouth slowly closing before her shrill voice rose. "You asked her what she was doing!? That was completely uncalled for- how would you like someone to imply that you didn't have the skill to be a witch!"

Ron's brows rose and he scowled. "It just slipped out- she was so mousy. She looked like she'd jump away from her own shadow, what would she be doing alone walking around a scary crowded train for?"

Ginny's face was sour but she settled back on her heels, Harry thought she would rip into her brother for such crass thinking. But the girl pinked in the cheeks, and her eyes fell to the floor.

Harry's mouth dropped.

His brows furrowed and he looked to the ground, but then he lifted his head to stare in the direction Hermione had gone with her parents- he wondered if everyone she had ever met had thought that, wondered if everyone she would meet would think that.

He wondered why he'd thought that.

He could easily deduce, with his intimate knowledge of how she struggled to hear and how her magic tried to compensate with emotions and body language, that she had struggled to decipher what Ron had said, and then been presented with the usual default incredulous expression he wore- as if he didn't believe she belonged there.

Harry winced and rubbed the back of his neck. "I think we all were kind of mousy, and we were pretty stupid too."

Ron and Ginny flushed, easily recalling all the silly things they'd done in their first years.

"It's just that she had more of a reason to be so scared, and we did nothing to make friends with her."

Ginny shifted and her face became shrewd as she looked at him, and Harry shifted as he realized something had changed in her expression- it was odd but it didn't make him quite so uncomfortable now. "I think we all should feel a little bad for the way we treated her, but that's the way it happened- no one knew how to take her."

Harry looked straight at her, quiet and contemplative, absently recognizing the abrupt movement of Ron from the corner of his eye as he slowly nodded his head and agreed. But Hermione wasn't really mousy and unsure of herself- she had been content being independent and alone...it was everyone else that had taken her for the shy little girl who didn't want to make friends.

Harry was glad she actually did want more friends, otherwise he would have never known her, and he wouldn't have been able to realize how precious she was. Hermione was special: she worked

hard to understand a world she was thrust into just as Harry was; she made a point of smiling whenever she was around people who actually knew her, but never had he seen her scowl unless she was being confronted by Draco; and she didn't mind when Harry asked questions or stared or got confused. She simply helped him as best she could and tried to show him what she meant when they met with a communication gap.

Harry cleared his head and nodded firmly, Hermione was special and she was his friend.

It didn't matter that Ginny looked so sly when she talked of her, it didn't matter that Ron didn't understand how they had come to be friends- all that mattered was that she was. Hermione had taught him how to stand up, and he would do just that.

Even if it meant defying those he had come to hold dear- because really, he held her dear too, and everyone else needed to realize how special she was. They'd come around, just like Harry had.

.....

An owl came the next day, and Hermione was absolutely smitten with it. It didn't need to hear her speak to understand her, and it had the loveliest brown mist and the gentlest beak as it nibbled on her ear while she watched her parents read the letter and speak rapidly between themselves.

Her mother was crying, just a little, and Hermione could only watch and tilt her head as they spoke over her. She withdrew to the side of the kitchen, watching her parents worry and fret as her school work remained spread out upon the kitchen table. She understood that her parents were very wary of sending her back out to school instead of continuing their home schooling of her, they were too used to her coming home frustrated and withdrawn because of the other people behaving so awkwardly, and some even cruelly, around her due to her uniqueness.

But her parents didn't understand, they couldn't see. Hermione was drawn to the promise in the letter, the flowing script of words she wouldn't have imagined before due to the fact that she didn't think

she'd be a witch, let alone much of anything- and she wondered if that was a sound, like wind whooshing through her hair as she read and reread and wondered...and hoped.

She caresses the sparkling ink with trembling fingertips: Hogwarts

Would it be different there?

Chapter 6

Dear Harry,

I can't believe it's only been a week. It seems like there's nothing to do now that I can't see my friends or do some schoolwork, and yes, that means I've finished it already. I was bored out of my mind and had nothing to do until my parents finally let me walk to the library. They're very busy this summer, and I'm very glad they let me keep Crookshanks in the house for company.

How are you? I hope things are calm over there. *(Harry smiled at her worry and delicate phrasing, for he'd never come outright and told her exactly what went on at his summer house with his extended family.)* And please try to attempt doing your homework; I can't help you if you haven't done anything!

Well, see you at the end of summer!

Hermione

...

Dear Hermione,

It feels like it's been months, doesn't it? Thanks for writing a letter, I was bored too. Though, I haven't done my homework...yet. I hope you don't stay locked up in the house, we need to get sunshine once and a while. But you are an observant witch- surely you can go into the yard more often. I actually got out of the house to the library myself, though don't be so surprised. I didn't do homework. I only looked up some sign language, but I got so hooked on the stuff. It's amazing! You have to teach me more when fall semester starts!

Seriously though, I have had a surprisingly nice time...we'll see how that goes.

See you,

Harry

I'm sorry I can't be there for you, but I'm sure you'll do fine. You're right about one thing though- the Dursley's are being horrid. I don't think they'd let me leave to visit another 'freaky' friend. But I'm sure McGonagall will look out for you, and you can do anything.

You'll be happy to know I am almost finished my homework, I left transfiguration for last though- you know me and those wand movements. Tricky little buggers they are.

And I'll be sure to warn the Dursley's- I don't think they've contemplated curses sent by muggle mail.

Be sure to get outside won't you? I can't have you cooped up all summer; even I get outside to trim the hedges once in a while.

Harry

(Harry paused in thought, and then hastily scribbled on his last thought before moving to answer Ron's letter.) PS, Ron said Ginny's been talking about an old friendship and Luna, do you know anything about that?

...

Ron,

Yeah, my summer's pretty good. I wouldn't mind getting your mum's food though, and yes the Dursleys are feeding me. I don't know anything that goes on with Ginny, why don't you ask her?
Harry

...

Dear Harry,

Thank you for writing me again. I was kind of lonely- a couple of the neighborhood kids decided to have a picnic at the park, I chickened out and didn't go. Instead I'm writing you- which *is* more fun let me assure you.

It's awkward being around the kids who I used to attend primary school with. They still look at me oddly even though I've been deaf for

some time. I think it's even harder on the boys, and it would be very mean of me to make them uncomfortable just so I could get off the property. And I'm making excuses aren't I? You must think I'm a very pathetic Gryffindor, scared of a little socializing. But I'd rather be spending time with you, at least you understand me and I wouldn't have to hide all the things I know about magic.

Even when the kids came to invite me they couldn't look me in the eye and instead asked my mother for permission (and I was the one to answer the door!).

So I'm sorry I didn't get out- but I did play with Crookshanks out on our grounds. He's quite happy to be chasing butterflies and messing with my hair, but I think he misses Hagrid's treats. He took a liking to my cat when he heard his story; he has such a soft spot for abused animals. And Crookshanks is very good about alerting me to strangers on the street; I don't know what I'd do without him here.

I'm sorry I rambled. I've been jittery waiting for Mme. Pomfrey...and the neighbors aren't helping.

About Ginny and Luna, they're in the same year. I think Luna calls it 'friends by default'- but they drifted apart some time ago and she hasn't talked to the girl in a while. Maybe that's it? I'm not sure if that helps, sorry.

Hope to see you soon!

Hermione

...

Hermione,

Your neighbors sound as stupid as mine, but at least Crookshanks can cheer you up- Hedwig got locked up so I wouldn't cause any mischief.

Never apologize for feeling nervous. I think everyone does at some point so there's no point in fretting more. I think we've had a similar

conversation, haven't we-About first years and being frightened? But I guess it's different if it involves Pomfrey and McGonagall.

I'm not sure how to ask this, but I guess I'll just do it. You've never nagged me for asking a question or looking stupid. But I feel stupid right now...how did you lose your hearing? The way you talk about it sometimes...it's weird thinking of it like that though- I'm so used to you being as you are. But I feel like a bad person for not knowing about you, and then I feel even worse for having to ask and maybe hurting you.

But the truth is I don't know much about you. I don't know your favorite color or just how you saved Crookshanks; I don't know how you reacted to your first owled letter or how your parents took your magic. I don't even know if you had accidental bursts before you received the letter!

We've never talked about it; actually we've never talked about a lot of things. It seems we forget everything else when we're in Hogwarts.

Did you try at first- when you came to Hogwarts? I don't think I could've, Ron and I became friends by accident, sort of. And Ginny kind of just tagged along when she came. I don't think we were an accident, I tried so hard to figure you out- but look how much I still don't understand. But I'm glad in a way; I've had enough of accidents.

So I'm sorry, I haven't been the best friend to you.

Forgive Me,

Harry

...

Harry, you won't believe what I found out! It turns out Luna and Ginny were friends before she started hanging out with us! That's so weird! But Gin said that Luna drifted off, didn't spend so much time with her while she made friends with us. *(So Ginny wasn't the one to drift away? As good as he knew Luna he thought she wouldn't drift from a relationship- though she was prone to drifting in thought.)* That must be how Neville made friends with her, eh? *(But you didn't mention*

Hermione, Harry frowned.) The guy's the shyest I've ever seen, and he hangs out with that Hermione girl so it's not like they'd make fast friends.

Well, other than that shocker summer's been going pretty normally. But mum wants me to degnome the garden again (*Harry could practically see Ron's eyes roll*). So I'll see you later.

Ron

...

Harry,

You can't conclude such idle comments with a poignant observation and expect me not to notice. I'm very sorry to write this, but I don't think Cedric was an accident. And, if anything, stop blaming yourself.

Blame Voldemort.

My favorite color is orange-red, like alpine lilies you know? (*Harry's smile slowly overtook his shocked face as she abruptly changed the course of her letter, distracting him with pleasant observations and trusting him to accept her blunt dismissal of his guilt. He enjoyed the way she focused on what was light and humorous, though she still paid due attention to what was needed and serious. He found that it was purely Hermione to giggle as she got over something, to understand that there was more than just the moment and see the oddity that would later make it okay- make everything okay.*) And the rising sun, pumpkins and Crookshank's tail- it's a vibrant living color don't you think? Maybe that soft periwinkle blue color is a close second- at least I can wear that one, orange makes me blend into those Cannons posters someone put up in the common room.

I don't believe I dislike any color, and I know you feel the same way- wasn't your preferred color brown? Like broomsticks and chocolate? (*Harry grinned openly, fond of her keen recollection and her odd way of phrasing.*)

There's something silly about associating everything with colors and then judging them. So I don't believe in hating a color. But I guess I

do like orange-red because it reminds me of home- Crookshanks is always ready to cuddle, my dad sits with me to watch the sun rise from the atrium where Mum grows those lilies...

Anyway, I got Crookshanks in a side street of Diagon alley- he was so scraggly and wet that I couldn't just leave him! And my mom fainted when the first owl letter arrived- my Dad jumped up and ran for the broom. *(Harry grinned wider, his cheeks hurting as he pictured the motherly slight frame of Mrs. Granger reacting to the owl and Mr. Granger's frantic swinging of the muggle broom.)* He was a darling owl though, and so gentle! He didn't mind me petting him or anything! *(Harry thought Hermione must have been quite attached, her parents had bought a family owl- it seems they'd gotten over their scare enough to spoil their daughter with some feathered company.)*

My first accidental burst of magic was on my birthday- I blew up the cake when I made my wish. *(Harry laughed quietly, quickly darting a glance to the light under his locked door to make sure the Dursley's weren't coming at the noise before returning to the letter and the moonlight.)* It was okay though, because my wish was that my parents could actually be there- so only my nanny witnessed it. She was very confused afterwards - enough to write it off to the alcohol I always saw her nipping from the wet bar in Dad's office – so my parents never heard of it.

And Harry, despite the questions and unknowns...you are the best friend I've ever had. I've known Neville and Luna for a long time, and it might be something to do with how they were raised but they never are curious about who I am out of school- as a muggle. You are. It's nice to know that you care enough to wonder- and we have that understanding.

You know I'm not stupid just because I can't hear...and that I am powerful even though I'm muggleborn. You pay attention to me and what I want to say, what I can't say sometimes...it's nice to have someone who can do that. So thank *you*.

I've never really had friends...when I was in primary school I was the quiet girl in the corner. *(Harry's face softened, his hands shaking as he pursed his lips and continued.)* I got teased a lot, and it didn't help

that I had bushy hair and buck teeth and loved my books...I got the teeth fixed after a hex in the hallways; Mme. Pomfrey was very fussy over it. But she's very attached to me so it shouldn't come as a surprise. And it's nice to have you as a friend- it's harder for me to make friend's my age than most would believe.

Harry, this makes you one of the best friends a person could have. You looked past everything and saw me- so don't ever feel bad about wanting to know more, you're one of the few who even bother. Missing you,

Hermione.

...

Dear Harry Potter,

My summer is going well, but Daddy and I haven't found snorkacks yet. They're very shy aren't they? We spent a whole weekend camping just to see no sign of them. It was very disappointing. But the jackalopes were very nice, and they said that I would have a good year at school. How's your hair? It must be very hard to control with all your magic coursing through you untouched- you're very powerful that way, like Hermione. Poor girl.

Daddy lets me use his wand so my magic doesn't build up so obviously.

Oh, Happy Before Birthday! I know it is coming up soon, and I hope that you don't run into any Snoodleburrs. They really like to bug people on their birthing days.

Luna

...

Harry,

It's so boring at the burrow! Ron's been really testy lately and mom's running around the place still complaining about the tournament and Ron's underwater stint. I swear she's too weird sometimes.

Nonetheless, summer's going as usual and I can't wait for term to start- it's getting rather tedious with all the family at home.

Well, Happy Birthday and see you soon,

Ginny

...

Hermione,

Thank you.

I'm sorry I had to fumble my way through that before realizing you wouldn't be offended. I also realize you never finished answering my question, but that's alright. You can answer whenever you feel like it. I don't think it will change anything about you, so don't worry about anything like that. You're Hermione- and you're the best friend I've ever had. It's odd to say that since, really, you are the person I've known for the shortest length of time. So, if it really doesn't bother you- let me get a few things onto paper. I really don't think I could ever ask all this to your face, but that's nothing to do with how I feel you'd whap me over the head ...more that I'd be worried to see you trying so hard to get this out when I know you'd be hurting. I've read too much on the subject now, I know you're very special in this. So humor me, please?

So, what is it like- the difference I'm sure you've cataloged between hearing and then trying to lip read all the time? Does it make you pay more attention to other things? Did it take a while to learn? I can't very well imagine the abrupt change- the closest I've come is being introduced to the magical world. But it must have been doubly hard for you; I didn't have to deal with losing anything really important.

So, I'm really looking forward to seeing you at the station- the summer seems to be dragging on far longer than the others...

Missing you,

Harry

...

Dear Harry,

I realized it was your birthday soon; it's strange that we both were born around the same time and yet never really knew. Hermione wrote to me about it- she's very disappointed that she can't bring you anything. (I swear she was ready to march to your relative's door! She's scary like that sometimes.) So I am writing to wish you a happy birthday, and I hope your summer went well. It will be back to the books soon, and no more lazing about the library trying to find a question to stump Hermione.

Strange game, I know, but she's never disappointed us yet. It's kind of fun, the things you learn- and we always have a good laugh. Also, Hermione seems to know a little something about *everything*, so it's always interesting.

Maybe that's why she knew we'd make good friends. I don't think anyone else could have fallen into place quite like you have.

Regards and Best Birthday Wishes,

Neville

...

Neville,

A Happy birthday to you too. And I hope you've still got a hold of Trevor- my aunt says there's a cold snap coming in that could hurt him if you're not careful. I'll have to say thanks to Hermione too, it seems she's very worried about me.

Thanks again for the thought,

Harry

...

Harry,

Happy Birthday mate! Sorry I couldn't get you more, but I only had enough time to stop in for some candies before mum rushed me- she's getting very paranoid. Well, hope you don't get a stomach ache from them!

Ron.

...

Dear Harry

Apologies. I drifted off in my last letter, I realize. But really, that shouldn't mean that I didn't want to tell you- just that it was harder to find words. Sometimes I think I read too much, and that all the words I know are fighting each other to get out so that I don't know which to choose. It makes me feel pretty stupid, actually. And Mme. Pomfrey and Professor McGonagall made their last visit...I don't think it worked quite how they wanted it to. My parents have been moping about they house when they come home from work, and everything seems so tiring. I hope they're not too disappointed. *(Harry's features tensed as he read her dry description, his mind wandering to what she thought about it; if she was scared and frightened and maybe a little disappointed in herself...he wondered if that was why she didn't say anything.)*

I still can't hear, though sometimes there's a hum- and it fluctuates in pitch. I've gotten so used to silence that it's almost annoying. I'll survive though. If I learned to live with silence I can easily continue to do so. Really, I don't know what I'd do if I could actually hear again. And my parents would have to get used to another change, it took so long for them to learn sign language and how to get my attention, even with my magic helping. But they're very scared to let me do things, even though they try to encourage me to get out and do more. It's the way it works I guess. When I was younger and got teased, well, bullied a lot it was only staying after school and avoiding the other kids that let me get by relatively safe. And one of those times I didn't stay late enough. That one time there was an accident and I hit my head- it was odd hearing silence after their taunts, almost like a blessing for one quick moment. And then it was permanent.

(Harry felt his eyes burn and the swallow got stuck in his throat- and he wondered if his 'accidents' were anything like hers. If they were more accidents because of some other devious design in some one else's mind. A part of him just knew they were and wanted to rise and protect her all the more for it- though he knew she could survive without his involvement.)

It created quite a fuss in the neighborhood. The boys apologized, but it's still so weird to be around them. I don't think they know how to act around me. Everyone was so hard on them after it happened. But the boys trully regretted, and now the schools are pretty tense about supervision. They found ways to prevent it from happening again becasuse they really didn't know what to do with me.

It took a while for the neighbors to figure out how to work around my deafness, and sometimes they still forget. My parents are very supportive and are always reminding people that I can't hear them, but it throws them off to be reminded. It's painful to be the cause of that.

At Hogwarts there are spells to make sure I can 'hear' all the teachers are saying, even when they aren't facing me. Professor Snape even has a talent that lets me hear him better; I'm thinking I'll try to learn it so I don't have to watch other people struggle so much when they try to talk to me. But the professors do work with me and my magic, it seems that the accident awoke my baser magic...I have a tendency to use small wandless silent spells when I get overly emotional and let go of the restraints I've been taught. Otherwise my magic likes to drag my senses into overdrive over every little magical thing...and the castle is absolutely covered with spell work, it makes my eyes tired. *(Harry slowly smiled- his heart lightening as he realized that Hermione was okay. Certainly he would still make sure to relay his support the next he saw her, but life had taught her to stand up again and again...and this time he would be standing up beside her, helping her if she so needed it)*

It's almost time to meet at the train! I hope you have all your school supplies handy, and I'll help you with that transfiguration as soon as possible.

Lots of hugs,

Hermione

.....

AN: Sorry for the long wait, but this was actually supposed to be a part of the last chapter...and the muse took the letters and ran with them. The reason there is no flashback is because, there is some revealing in the letters already, and of the two flashbacks I have I reaaaaaally want to delete one. Ahah. So you'll only see the other one.

I'm also sorry for mistakes and any confusion, I'll take the time to reread this later and edit...right now I'm sick, my eyes are burning, and I have to get to work.

Chapter 7

Harry glowered and roughly allowed his fingers to tense on the handle of his trolley, unaccountably angered that he'd spent the summer isolated and alone because Dumbledore had thought it best. And no one had thought about what Harry thought of it all.

As usual.

But then Harry winced and retracted the thought.

The Weasley children were regretful and had even stumbled out some kind of apology...and his other friends had written.

"Harry, we're sorry." Ron looked distinctly uncomfortable and Ginny shifted with a sour expression. "The few times we wrote we got scolded, and then it just..." Ron shrugged helplessly, and Harry's cold eyes closed in defeat before he shook his head, dark hair skittering across his furrowed brow, before he sighed out a great breath that heaved his shoulders.

"Yah, 'kay."

Harry sobered as he realized that his other friends wrote...and it was probably because no one thought that he'd be their friend, as people tended to write off the triad as something unimportant and therefore insignificant. Harry blew out a heavy breath against his bangs, twisting his neck to relieve some stiffness as he ignored the gangly Ron at his side and the walk-tripping Ginny on his other. He didn't find it relaxing to be in their presence; angry and hurt that they'd blindly took Dumbledore's advice over his loneliness.

Hadn't even written about the attack or to ask if he was okay, instead waiting until he saw them and had been festering in his malcontent...in his doubts.

And then it was only the odd friends he'd recently made, the three that had been overlooked and shunned and taunted, that pulled him from his headaches and the tight ache in his chest.

He would much more welcome their peculiar company than the stifling uncertainty that had become of his time with the Weasleys.

Ron cleared his throat at his unenthusiastic response, his brown eyes narrowed in thought and discomfort as he shuffled, "I'll just go get a compartment then, yeah."

Ginny cleared her throat and looked between the both of them, her brown eyes wide and unsure before she drew in a breath and straightened.

Harry felt the mirthless smile on his face, because the Weasleys were again uncomfortable with his brooding seriousness.

But he did have reason for it, and he thought sadly that Ron and Ginny didn't know him well enough for them to take him out of a funk—even Ginevra's feminine intuition seemed to fail her in regards to Harry's emotional rollercoasters.

He blew out a frustrated sigh and tended to ignoring Ginny and her painfully reticent fidgeting.

Harry sighed again and ran a hand through his hair, letting the brief cooling sensation calm him down as he glanced around anxiously. He was looking forward to seeing Hermione and Neville...and Luna to some odd extent.

Harry smiled slightly.

His introduction to all three of them, while not necessarily usual, had endeared them to the qualities he found in them all the more. Quiet yet protective Neville and his earnest desire to be kind to everyone, Luna and her blunt acceptance of anything and everything, and Hermione...

Hermione was strong and yet vulnerable, shy and yet proud, and defiant and accepting all at once. She'd declined an invitation to the Yule while encouraging the asking of Luna (who would have been left out otherwise...Harry softened further in remembrance of the laughing conversation about accents and lip reading and misunderstandings). She'd accepted her friends and stood up for

them even as she took all the teasing and taunts, couldn't hear their fond voices in greeting or the idle sounds of companionship.

He had many things to ask Hermione, face to face, now that he'd had the summer to contemplate and learn. He was certain he could hold some conversation in sign language now- it was only once in a while he stumbled on the simple signs; he just needed to expand his vocabulary. And really, the grammatical structure was simple, and even if you messed it up the gist of what you were trying to say would come across.

But he wanted to ask her if she'd had to teach herself and her parents: if they'd struggled with interpreting simple diagrams explaining three dimensional movements (as Harry knew he had when he'd tried and struggled with the few ratty books on sign language in the library); struggled with the stigma associated with being deaf; struggled with the introduction of a magical world on top of all that.

Being friends with Hermione had taught him a lot of things- he couldn't wait to see how the year went now that he knew how to observe and learn. The study sessions their little mismatched group gathered for had made him realize how much she practiced her pronunciation for spells (even as she was able to do them silently and even wandlessly- Harry wondered at how her desire to blend in as part of wizarding society and not draw attention to herself had stilted others' perception of her. He knew it had for him). Harry just knew that, in the coming year, Hermione's presence would mean that he understood as much as he observed, would be able to seek help that wouldn't distract him, would be able to study and ask questions without worrying about any communication gap (which was rather funny, considering Hermione was reclusive due to a communication gap not many would understand).

Harry would be able to learn without any expectations or judgments, simply a kind friend who wanted him to learn for the sake of learning and understanding and doing better for himself.

Already he'd felt his magic, became more in tune with it and the direction he'd wanted it to go in. There was a stronger awareness of what magic could do, what magic could become...

The mismatched trio he'd become friends with had opened up his core- he knew exactly what he wanted his magic to do and therefore more efficiently cast his spells.

Harry couldn't wait to see what the long summer of studying had done to his focus (which in truth he'd gotten done, and he'd even attempted the Transfiguration wand work (though he had failed miserably in confusion)). He grinned and scanned the crowd for his friends, unaccountably ecstatic that summer was over because it meant that he'd get to see Hermione and them again.

He silently took his trunk to store in a compartment, his stuff there like some primal claim to the area. Ginny had broken off some time during the walk of the train's hall, and he lifted and rolled a stiff shoulder as he glanced about before deciding to head to the platform- it would be easier to find his friends there.

He stepped off the train to look around, tilting his head lazily and finally settling down as he realized he would have to wait a little longer.

It shouldn't be that bad really, what was a few more minutes compared to a whole summer?

But, unaccountably, it was. Harry felt like his skin was stretching and pulling in anxiousness, his heart beating hard against its protective cage like it wanted to be free, his magic lighting up and *surging* along his blood.

He wanted to see Hermione as soon as possible.

So Harry gave up any pretense of aloofness, peacefulness, and stood to weave his way through the growing platform crowd. He finally stood himself quite near the entrance, off to one side so he could watch everyone who entered and be seen by anyone looking for him.

He practically couldn't control the grin of anticipation breaking out on his face, but he managed. He startled instead when someone was suddenly with him in his little world, and he was brought back to the bustle of the train station for the magical school of Hogwarts as her choppy movements drew his attention.

Ginny shuffled as she stood beside him, and he wondered what she had to say that couldn't have been said in summer letters (the few that he'd actually gotten from her- around Dumbledore's orders anyway). Then she visibly gathered herself and straightened, her chin coming up to display her shy smile as she tucked some red hair behind her ear. When she looked up at him, tentatively, he shifted and regarded her. "Harry," she started only to shift again, losing all her collected courage and looking away.

"Ginny, do you need something?" He finally turned fully to her, and he watched her odd display of mannerisms as she flushed and then smiled and drew up.

"You know, last year everyone thought you had some secret relationship going on, all the girls were saying that was why you were avoiding me- us." She smiled shyly, her eyes closing and her freckles prominent. "But everything's okay now, we can hang out together and you can stop worrying. It's not like Neville and the others will bother us."

He furrowed his brow.

She emitted a light girlish laugh, and Harry felt his entire spine stiffen with the need to suddenly get away from her. "Those rumors were pretty stupid, now that I think about it."

Unable to still his curiosity, he relaxed slightly and regarded her. "How so?"

She smiled and tossed her head while she snorted her amusement. "Please, Luna's not your type. I know- she used to hang out with me, and she's more the ditsy Ron type."

Harry felt his blood smoldering, his whole form tensing as suddenly his nails were digging into the palms of his hands from his fists. But

he managed to settle himself, and he breathed out heavily between his clenched teeth. (*My type...?*)“What about Hermione?”

Ginny’s face blanched, as if the idea hadn’t even occurred to her- and then she emitted a fake little laugh. Her hand waved in the air, “Please, we know why Hermione’s not girlfriend material.” Harry gaped as he suddenly understood why Ginny had changed from being so hostile to indulgently accepting of Hermione.

Harry sharply turned his head to the side, biting back the angry comment rising in his heart. He stared at the young girl he called friend as she tossed her crimson hair and smiled *just* so.

“No, I don’t know.”

She choked on her laugh, her brown eyes wide as she stared at him.

She suddenly jostled forward as Luna knocked shoulders with her on her way to Harry, her face ever dreamy and unaware though Harry’s eyebrows rose when he spotted her wand in her hand instead of behind her ear. Ginny righted herself clumsily and glared, and then gaped, at the absentminded blonde.

Luna ignored her. “I’m hungry, I do hope there’s pudding at the feast.”

Harry gaped as well, a happy stunned uprising in his heart as he realized he wasn’t the only one who could see how precious and beautiful Hermione was. He swallowed almost painfully as he took in Neville’s disgusted glower from behind the fourth year, his usually affable face contorted grossly as he stiffly made his way around the Weasley daughter.

Ginny sputtered and faltered under their combined stoniness, her eyes darting between the powerful trio with a sudden understanding of all they could do- all they knew about magic and how to use it because they *were* the shunned, and had learned and discovered to ease their aches.

She quietly took her leave.

The trio stood in silent, blessed, comfort for but a few more minutes before Harry's green eyes lit up- Hermione had just walked through the barrier. She was as small and unassuming as ever, but it seemed that Harry's eyes were drawn to her now as they had never been until just the previous year.

There was a light to her that seemed to call him- despite the fact that her messy curls were in a hasty bun secured by her wand, her eyes distracted into glancing at Crookshanks as he paced in his carryon, and her form stumbling under the weight of her book bag and the awkwardness of her trolley...

Hermione was beautiful.

Harry grinned as he greeted Hermione with a large gesture, watched her catch his eye and then blush before she was smiling and making her way over to him. He pulled her into a quick hug as greeting, feeling unaccountably happy when she squeezed him in return and then looked up to his face with a giggle. One that she didn't bother covering up and it seemed like her hands made no move to.

He hesitated before he brought up his hands and signed the phrase- *I had a great summer. I learned a lot.* Though he was still having trouble with his subject comment switch around, he liked the way her eyes lit up and her smile prominently displayed her white teeth before he was suddenly engulfed in a Hermione Bear Hug.

He laughed as Neville came up to give her a large, tight hug and twirl her around- her shoulder bag dropping to the walkway where he picked it up to watch the dizzy brunette be pulled into a far gentler hug by the absent minded Luna. When Hermione was finally left alone she blinked at them and smiled shyly, her hands grasping the carry-on case for Crookshanks before Neville took it and set off for their claimed train compartment.

Luna giggled randomly, reaching up to pat down Hermione's wayward hair as the girl laughed in response. Bulbous eyes turned to him happily, "See, the poor thing has no other outlet for her magic."

A startled laugh was pulled out of him as he finally understood.

Hermione flushed and shrugged one shoulder lightly, Neville finally returning from behind her to startle her with another, gentler hug before they all settled down.

Harry watched Hermione twitch her nose before he smiled and caught her attention. "Has it come along any?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at his lips, whispering to herself before her face cleared and she shook her head. The blush she presented this time was shamed, and her eyes fell to look at her mary janes. "I don't think it ever will. But now I know that the buzzing is really strong magic- I accidentally ran into this old lady with a rather large beauty charm." She smiled ruefully up at him.

Harry leveled heavy eyes on her, regrets pulling at him before he firmed and smiled. Hermione was fine this way, as she'd been since he'd known her. Even if she could never again hear the birds call in the morning or the splash of waves on sand, the purr of Crookshanks or the hoot of content Hedwig.

He pulled her into another hug, and felt her tense form relax and a sigh escape against his shirt. Neville and Luna gave him an inquiring look, and Harry closed his eyes- they were all friends. "Madame Pomfrey tried to give her back her hearing through a magical procedure this summer; it didn't work quite as they'd wanted it to."

Hermione shifted slightly with a giggle, her dewy eyes looking up to him from under her leonine hair. "Can you talk again?"

Harry startled, laughed with surprise. "What? Why?"

She bit her lip and smiled shyly. "I like feeling the vibrations." Her eyes flicked to one side as she blushed.

And Harry smiled gently, carefully pulling her head back to rest at the base of his throat as he returned to their two friends.

This was the closest she'd ever come to hearing his voice.

"They've been running tests on Hermione since she wasn't born deaf- they thought they might be able to encourage the healing."

Luna's soft glow seemed subdued, her smile gentle and eyes loving as she regarded her friend. "Well, Hermione's too special to just conform. I don't think the jackalopes meant this anyway."

Neville smiled off kilter and his twinkling eyes fondly regarded Harry and the girl resting contently in his arms. "Hermione is just fine though, isn't she?" His face clouded with worry before he shook his head and cleared it. "What am I saying? Hermione won't let anything get her down- she'd laugh at death for any odd reason she could think of."

Harry grinned and laughed, liking the way Hermione gasped and then pressed her ear against his clavicle to get closer to the sound.

She reluctantly pulled away, a small smile on her face and her eyes sparkling. "You laughed."

Harry grinned and Neville chuckled, "Yeah, he did. And you lit up."

Hermione grinned outright and blew a strand of hair from her face. "It feels funny."

Luna tilted her head, her wide eyes calculating before she looked at Neville and quickly poked him in the side while pressing her ear to his collarbone. Neville startled out a laugh before blushing and settling himself down.

Harry and Hermione exchanged grins and laughs of their own.

Their little quad slowly settled into regular student topics, pondering who would be their DADA professor, wondering about the feast, debating over who would be prefects this year...

Harry grinned and looked up only to startle and stare.

The Diggory's had just entered the magical platform. Watching the proud family was at once awe inspiring and humbling, the stiff limp of Cedric's injured leg lent a stern reprimand for their ignorance of war and Voldemort, a macabre reminder that they were too sheltered and needed to grow up and take a stand.

He watched with wide eyes as Cedric spotted them and slowly but determinedly approached, his face set as he limped proudly beside his exuberant father.

The strapping youth had targeted him with steely eyes, and Harry could only stand beside a confused Hermione as the crowd parted and whispered and the Hufflepuff champion continued to approach.

He finally stopped in front of the mismatched group, and he drew up to his full height even though he was slightly trembling from strain and there was a pained tenseness in his lips.

Harry shuffled nervously.

“Harry, it’s good to see you again.” Cedric offered a small glance to the gathering crowd before straightening further, proud and defiant. “I can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done; I wanted you to know that I’m happy you’re on our side. I’ll be at your back for the war.”

Harry swallowed and smiled: something insignificant and quiet from when he was a small underfed boy who got thrown into dark cupboards. “I’m just glad you’re okay, it will be good to see you in the halls again.”

Cedric smiled before finally glancing at Hermione, taking in her wide eyes and curly hair before his face softened and he shuffled. “Ah, I wanted to thank you too.” He mumbled, his head tilted to the ground, and Harry watched Hermione narrow her eyes and lean forward now that his lips were suddenly harder to read. He pursed his lips and turned back to the older boy as he continued, “My Pa heard some of the aurors talking about you, and some stuff from the medical wing.” He offered his lopsided smile as he looked up, “Though I have to say you’re the quietest Gryffindor I’ve ever met.”

Hermione drew back with her confusion, and Harry shook his head before tapping her shoulder. His stewing anger at Ginny and the Weasleys made him defiant of any reaction he’d get from Cedric or the milling students, all he cared about right now was the girl at his side and how uncomfortable she looked now that Cedric was waiting for her response- a response that she didn’t know how to give because she hadn’t understood him.

She looked up to him with wide eyes, and he softened his own when he caught her threatening tears and the tremble in her lips. She knew that a sizeable crowd was staring. (He hated how different this was from the kind witch who had listened to his laugh with her ear against his chest, her smile bright as she explained her knowledge and had every intention of sharing her joy in it.) So Harry smiled and spoke softly, knowing that she could tell he was from the way his muscles would tense in his face (he appreciated her keen observational skills all the more when she took in his visual cues and relaxed visibly, which in turn set him more at ease). "Cedric was just saying thank you, I don't think he meant to put you on the spot like that."

She smiled bravely and turned back to the confused hufflepuff and his patriarch. "I don't need any thanks; I did what anyone else would have in my place. But thank you for it nonetheless."

Cedric glanced furtively at Harry, and the dark haired boy narrowed his eyes at the scrutinizing grey of the Diggory stare. He wondered, briefly, what he would do- but then Cedric proved he belonged in the ever accepting Hufflepuff House when he shrugged his shoulders and smiled- his face clearly in view. "Forgive me- I had no idea you were...ah." He fumbled with that cautious and painful awkwardness that only made it more awkward, and Harry grimaced before straightening.

Amos blinked at them, wondering what it was all about before his face cleared and he gaped at Hermione and then Cedric. He was a rather unobservant fellow, but not to the point where he failed to catch on- "You mean she's a dummy?"

Hermione bristled beside Harry, and he glared as Cedric gave his father a sharp glance. Harry stepped forward firmly, trying to ignore the whispers of the students and the guilty look Cedric was giving him. "Hermione holds the best grades in our school year, she's not stupid." He spat out, protective and wondering if Hermione dealt with this all the time.

Cedric cleared his throat. "My father didn't really mean that Harry; and Hermione, I'm sorry he said it like that."

"But she can't hear me." Amos protested.

"I can carry on conversation just fine sir, but I wonder if you can observe proper courtesy and do the same." Rang out her sharp voice, and Harry settled with a vindictive pride as Amos startled and flushed.

He felt the hard working of his throat as he forced himself to swallow all the retorts rising on his tongue; strangely, they tasted acidic and bitter as they went back down. Hermione is smart, Hermione is kind, Hermione can do wandless magic, Hermione can do silent magic, Hermione is shy, Hermione is brave, Hermione is beautiful, Hermione is gentle, Hermione helps *me*, Hermione cares, Hermione loves, Hermione cries, Hermione laughs...Hermione can do *everything* she sets her mind to....

Even as Harry knew all these things he heard the rising murmurs of the crowd, saw the shifty looks and the darted glances as Hermione stiffened and thrust her chin out in the very same defiant look she had given Malfoy last school term.

Harry felt his chest tighten as he saw that look again, wondering about the vulnerability he could see in it even as Amos backed up a step from her glare.

Luna huffed and absently flicked her wrist to release some of her tension- her wand was back behind her ear so no one flinched, but Harry saw a few people titter a laugh at 'Loony Luna Lovegood.'

Neville glowered darkly and shifted, his bulk suddenly more ominous and maliciously prominent- but people gave him curious looks and then dismissed him as they had learned to do for the kind bumbling idiot he was known to be.

Harry's eyes flashed in a glare.

These were his friends.

Luna had the knowledge to hex anyone rude enough to stare and laugh and dismiss them in the same breath. Neville was brave enough to stand in the defense of his friends and seriously harm anyone who so much cracked a grin. And Hermione... Hermione was strong around her handicap, she'd overcome it and welcomed the differences it brought upon her- she was victorious and strong and

would fight and stand up just as well as anyone of them could if they had half the courage she possessed.

And Harry found he was accepted among them - the mismatched and shunned – because he understood and was understood.

So Harry glowered darkly, listened to the murmurs and taunts and laughs- then he nodded his head firmly. He ignored Ginny and Ron shifting uneasily, just at the edge of the crowd- their confusion and slight shame very visible as they gave him sorry glances.

He ignored Cedric and his father as they shifted, tense and worried and Amos almost pained in his regret.

He ignored the way Luna absently tilted her head, blonde messy waves falling across her shoulders as her wide eyes stared at him and smiled.

He ignored Neville, the large boy red and angry as he glared out at those people whispering and pointing.

He did face Hermione, because this was for her.

Harry was going to stand up.

And it was about bloody time that someone did.

“Hermione is a wonderful person who doesn’t mind helping people when they ask, or offering that help if it’s needed.” Hermione tilted her head, her eyes incredulous and wide as a slow smile spread her lips.

Neville straightened and stared at him.

“I don’t think any one of you, even you adults”- he quickly gave the gathered parents – Amos- a dark look –“understand that she’s worked very hard to understand us. And we’ve done nothing in return.”

Luna settled into her usual calmness, her large eyes blinking as she smiled.

“So Hermione, thanks for teaching me how to better control my magic, for listening to me and putting up with me when I’m broody and annoying. Thank you for writing to me this summer and worrying about me, for caring and communicating.”

Hermione laughed lightly, her eyes sparkling with tears and her cheeks rosy with a large smile.

Harry finally smiled, proud and defiant. “So, I was wondering- would you go to Hogsmeade with me?”

Hermione laughed even as the crowd hushed, her head thrown back and her curls swinging as she stepped closer to him. Her eyes crinkled with her bright smile, sparkling and so happy *he* felt exuberantly dizzy just watching her.

“Yes, I think I’d like that.”

Harry smiled, “Perfect.”

Harry, after all, did a very good job of standing up. The smiling young witch in front of him was more than perfect incentive for it. Their quartet settled into a calm acceptance- the crowd didn’t matter; their petty perceptions were pointless, their fingers and whispers plain ignorance, their understanding and ideas shallow.

The friends, and couple to be so much more, walked quietly to their claimed compartment, backs strong and their chins up as they broke through the crowd and smiled.

This year, they would stand up to whatever came their way.

And everyone else would know.

It was time to grow up and look around.

It was time to stand up.

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Hermione couldn't stop grinning as her parents conversed with the professors she might be taught under during her stay at the new school- a school for magical people with abilities she'd never dreamed of. She would be able to do this, there would be other people with her strange perceptions and she could make some friends.

She tightened her hold on the letter still in her hands (she hadn't put it down since they'd received the owl bearing it, and that had been weeks ago). Her mom pursed her lips and looked at her, and Hermione lost her smile as the strangers became confused and also looked at her, her parents stiff before they stood and moved over to her.

Her father's fingers smoothed through her hair as the stranger - a stern looking witch with a tartan robe – made a motion to her partner and he left the house. The lady remained in her calm position, and her mother started signing to her to explain the situation.

Hermione blushed as she realized she had been so caught up in watching these people she had forgotten to watch them-she hadn't looked to figure out what they were talking about.

She started panicking as she realized that the stern woman (Ms. McGonagall) and the school were unaware of her condition, they didn't know if she could actually attend.

Hermione started crying.

She was frantically tugging at her father's sleeve, his eyes wide and glossy as he stared at her, bewildered, and didn't understand a thing she was trying to say around her tears. She could feel her mother's hands in her hair, trying to grasp her shoulders, to stop her hands from clenching in the fabric of her father's shirt.

There was a sudden shift.

Hermione stilled as something around her – inside her – changed.

Her parents turned their wide eyes to the door, and Hermione followed their gazes to meet the prettiest twinkling eyes she had ever

seen. Her face cleared and a slow shy smile came over her, she barely had the notion to glance at the woman that had come in beside him.

“My name is Albus Dumbledore, and I wanted to speak to this young child before making any important decisions.” Hermione jumped as a voice resounded in her head, and her wide eyes stared at lips that had been moving- she could hear him?

Mr. Dumbledore seated himself slowly, carefully like he was afraid of startling her. Then he smiled- his pretty eyes crinkling – as he leaned forward to introduce the woman he entered with: “This is Madame Pomfrey, I would like her to do a check up on you and then I would like to perform a skills appraisal before I make any decisions. “

Hermione nodded frantically, enthralled by the gentle voice echoing in her head. She watched docilely as the nurse gently prodded her temples and made some complicated movements with her wand – that had to be a wand didn’t it? – Over her head and neck before tutting and writing something down on a paper that floated in midair.

Hermione’s eyes were wide and her lips were pursed into a curious form as she leaned as far forward as she could to watch the green of healing magic swirling around the paper.

A chuckle inside her mind startled her into looking at Mr. Dumbledore. He tilted his head forward and smiled from behind his ample whiskers, and Hermione lit up as the blue and gold around him became baby soft to match the twinkle in his eye.

That was a nice color- it was benign and encouraging and ...perfect for such a grandfatherly figure. She tilted her head and leaned forward to speak, because she had never met another person that had bothered to learn sign language.

“Mister, I can hear your voice. Is that because you shine blue and gold?”

She heard his laugh in her head, and her eyes felt wet at the weathered, well-used sound. She wanted to hear it again.

"No darling, that's because you're special." He shifted slightly in his chair, and Hermione watched him with all the attentiveness she'd learned to cultivate because of her handicap and people's natural inhibitions around her.

She bit her lip and smiled, unable to focus anywhere but to the nice man as he stroked his beard (pulling it out from under his belt in the process). "Does that mean I can go learn magic?" She leaned forward more, and she saw her parents startle violently and the two lady strangers jerk while the stoic, dark man merely tilted his head.

Her mother gave her a sad look and spoke while she signed. "Honey, we're not even sure if this is a good idea. You'll be so far away- what if something goes wrong?"

The older lady in tartan robes shifted slightly, her large eyes narrowing before she settled and whispered something to the lady that had checked her with the wand.

The gloomy man stepped forward, his expression dark and brooding as he regarded her- but she firmed under his glare: her lips pursed and her eyes bright as she observed the silver intelligence to him and the dark guilt he carried around his heart. "You must understand she'd be doubly prosecuted- not only is she handicapped but she comes from a muggle family. It might be in her best interest to lock her magic away."

She started at the sound in her head, but then realized exactly what he had said and gaped up at him with dismay.

This set up a furious conversation with the adults, and Hermione rushed to glance around and figure out what was going on. She only caught a few words correctly, and those were enough to send her into panic. Her parents were too worried, the strangers too unsure, and the kind Mr. Dumbledore was watching passively and not doing anything.

So she had to do something.

"No!" She stood up; her eyes wide and latently aware that she'd startled everyone. She calmed herself and took a deep breath, her

eyes stinging before she twisted her face to control herself. "I want to learn, please. I"- she paused, unsure of how to say it. Instead she closed her eyes and clasped her hands together, searching inside herself for the piece that felt so right. "I don't think I could live without magic- now that I know that's what I'm missing it seems as if I've never not known it. You must understand." She looked at them imploringly, and she was only met by startled wide eyes- Snape regarded her with some satisfaction (she wondered why that should be so, but then she realized the gentle brown had combined with his sharp silver- he thirsted for knowledge, he might just understand how connected she was to magic and the way she wanted to understand it).

Dumbledore laughed, and she closed her eyes with some contentment as it rung in her head and settled her nerves. "I do believe Miss Granger will be a fine addition to our school. Poppy-?" He turned to the nurse-witch.

And Hermione turned entreating eyes to her to make sure she knew without a doubt that she was serious- despite her ignorance and the troubles that would come.

The lady faltered under her steady stare, but Hermione didn't care. She continued as the woman regained herself and drew her shoulders back. Hermione narrowed her eyes, for the woman looked like she was gearing up to deliver bad news. She felt a sting in her eyes that hadn't been there for a long time, and a burning in her throat that meant she didn't dare attempt any speech for fear of confusing people more with garbled words.

"The young lady is very astute; it seems that her ability to understand us is not hindered by her lack of hearing." The woman bit her lip and shifted a quick glance Hermione's way, locking eyes before they softened and she turned to fully address the adults.

Hermione scrambled and moved, standing by her mother to watch Madame Pomfrey's lips. The adults shifted uncomfortably as her handicap was thrust into the limelight, but she ignored them and stared, focusing, feeling that electrifying rise tingling up her spine as her whole being seemed to focus and ignite from within.

She recognized what it was because she always seemed to, but now she knew exactly what to call it- magic.

Her magic.

Pomfrey swallowed and continued, trying to blink away the wetness in her eyes as Hermione observed a soft red engulf her heart and a healing green tug at her hands. "From the diagnosis spells, she wasn't born like this." She shifted, hesitation, and then she smiled quietly- a gentle brown care lighting her whole magical core up in view of Hermione's senses. "I dare hope that we might be able to heal her, at least partially, if I have time to give her some more intricate tests and work with her. As long as she's at the school she won't be trouble though, we'll just have to be cautious with how we talk to our classes," she gave Hermione a warm tilt of the head, "and ensure that Miss Granger can read the whole lesson."

Hermione lit up with a grin, feeling the pull at her cheeks that she hadn't felt in a very long time that indicated the full revealing of her large front teeth- but she didn't care.

*The tartan lady smoothed her hands down the side of her robes, her pursed expression calculating as she stepped forward to regard her. Hermione faltered, but then narrowed her eyes and felt her magic, her **magic**, light up and help her read the body language of the stern looking woman.*

She was cautious, but it had nothing to do with Hermione and the trouble she might represent- the smoky grey around her heart spoke of a hesitation due to her actual abilities and not her disabilities. Hermione narrowed her eyes and tilted her chin up, standing strong to reaffirm her conviction with the body language she had read and learned and practiced.

No one was giving her a refusal.

Not this time.

The laugh rang in her head, and she faltered with wide eyes before turning an amazed smile to Mr. Dumbledore, watching him closely even as she felt her mother startle beside her. She didn't look her

way though, even when the heavy reassuring hand of her father came down to rest upon her shoulder. "Miss Granger, dear, I'm sure everything will work out. I will introduce you to our Charms professor though; you'll need a spell for your quills to aid in taking notes." He made a grand gesture to the corner, where the quiet male had come in.

Hermione scrunched up her nose, arching back as her senses lit and she blinked to clear her eyes and then leaned forward to stare. Her mother was suddenly at her side, fretting and near tears before Hermione tried to calm her down- distracted glances being thrown at the man as the others milled about confusedly.

When Mrs. Granger had finally settled, Hermione swallowed and took a step forward, unable to resist the call for understanding as she watched him.

Mr. Dumbledore spoke quietly, reverently, and Hermione wondered why he asked them to watch before he turned to address her. "Mr. Flitwick is renowned in the wizarding world, I'm certain the two of you could work something out." He smiled and steeped his fingers, watching her before he tilted his head with a good natured, interested and sly, grin. "Now, what is it?"

She gaped at him briefly, unsure as to what exactly she was feeling before she felt a sour expression take over her face and she took a firm step forward. "Deception." Mr. Flitwick jumped, but then his face shifted into a feral grin and his form shifted, the dark solid grey that had surrounded him leaving as she watched the tall, unremarkable man from before suddenly become a short stubby man with features closely resembling the trolls in children's stories.

He performed a courtly bow, and Hermione's eyes were wide and her smile gaping as she breathed out a laugh. She took another step to him, marveling at the way the earthy brown now engulfed his heart as he gave her a playful, secretive wink. "I'm very good at charms as they say; that was one that made my form what everyone expects to see- a perfectly unexceptional stranger." He grinned again, revealing slightly pointed teeth as his eyes twinkled and Hermione spun to look at Dumbledore.

He was smiling behind his whiskers, and he nodded his head before turning to address the adults. "Miss Granger is quite special, as you saw. She will need training so that her magic doesn't simply react and try to read everything in more magical surroundings. She'll learn to control her core and ignore her urges to read people's magic when she doesn't need to. I dare say that she has enough knowledge of body language to need not rely on her innate magical talents." And he smiled and Hermione could only smile back, unused to such support coming from anyone other than her parents.

But this man wanted her in his school, and she felt a rising in her soul that had nothing to do with her magic and everything to do with the joyful tears coming to her eyes.

He politely ignored this, and turned to her parents and his four staff as she closed her eyes to listen to his voice ringing through her head. She smiled contently and stood stolidly, and she ignored the tug of her magic yearning to examine everyone else.

"Because I have a certain skill in Legilimens and Occlumency, your daughter is very capable of hearing me speak. Professor Snape here has these skills as well, and is quite able to teach Miss Granger some core training skills that will aid her- we'll have to set up some times before the term starts and then she can continue during her evenings while attending."

She was startled and her eyes snapped open as a different voice rang in her head, and her wide brown eyes met the calculating gaze of Mr. Snape- "We might even be able to teach her basic Legilimens, so that she has less difficulty reading lips and filling in any communication gaps." His lips curled into a very slight smile as his dark eyes continued to hold her locked in place.

But a slow smile overtook her lips as well, and she let it grow as Mr. Snape visibly startled at her acceptance. She liked his voice too; it had this rich quality of hidden depths and waiting talents- ones she couldn't wait to discover.

He collected himself and gave her a conceding nod.

"So then, Hermione's going to be okay?" Hermione watched her mom hesitate and flutter her hands about, unsure and unused to people fighting to have more contact with her daughter.

Hermione smiled and turned it down to the floor, waiting to hear the voice. She didn't want to even read the lips as Dumbledore answered, she wanted to hear and ignore, for a while, that she was deaf.

Maybe that could be fixed.

"She'll be a marvelous student- we'll gladly have her in our halls."

Hermione bit her lip to refrain from smiling too broadly and jumping at the elderly man to give him a hug.

"Thank you." She finally watched her dad say, his eyes narrowed (but she knew that was because he didn't like crying, and not because he distrusted the strangers- otherwise his stance wouldn't be so welcoming and his coloring wouldn't be so vibrantly brown).

Hermione jumped up and ran to her parents for a hug, bursting into tears that had to fight to get out around her laughter. She couldn't remember laughing in such a long time, and she grinned and turned in her father's arms. So her eyes sparkled and her magic soared and she felt entirely enlightened.

"Hermione," the gentle voice soothed her from her elated heights, and she let herself sober quietly as she looked at Mr. Dumbledore. "I know life's been hard for you, but we'll try everything to help you. You just have to remember to stand up, to be happy and find things that make you happy so you never have to cry." He smiled kindly, reminding her of the old St. Nicholas in her childhood picture book. "Yes, stand up against everything that gets you down and laugh. I believe it's the most beautiful sound in the world."

She could only laugh as she watched them, eagerly taking in the swirls of their cores as they retreated from her home.

Yes, she would stand up- she would laugh and live and...

She ran out of the house door after them, smiling and catching their attention as she burst out the front entrance to catch them at the end of her front walk. She gave them the most blinding grin she could muster, her joy bubbling up inside her as she watched their shock and skittishness move to curiosity and amusement.

“Thank you!” She tilted her chin up, her stance wide and open and welcoming. Unaccountably pleased that people who hardly knew her had agreed to help her and teach her despite her handicap- to help her overcome it more than she’d ever thought possible. “I’m going to make you proud, you’ll never regret this.”

Smiles, Madame Sprout laughing so that her whole jolly body shook and her eyes watered.

“No, I don’t think we ever will.”

The rest of the staff gave solemn nods, agreeing with their headmaster, their eyes twinkling as she stood there in her bare feet and watched them.

Mr. Flitwick turned to bow again, covered in his illusion charm and grinning. “I’ll see you soon, youngling. We need to work out the spells for your school equipment.”

Hermione nodded; proud and grateful and humbled all at once.

“We expect great things from you, Miss Granger.”

Hermione grinned, hardly taking the time to startle as they were suddenly gone before taking a deep breath and staring at the space they’d just left.

Her eyes closed and her head tilted back, and then she smelt the garden’s flowers, could feel the spiky coolness of trimmed grass under her feet, and she could swear she heard the wind blowing through her hair as the shadow of cloud passed over her skin.

The joy bubbled up within her, the excitement roiling under her skin and inciting the energy to coil her muscles and her imagination to

conjure fanciful pictures of mythical animals and majestic castles and beautiful princesses.

She laughed and didn't stop.

The End, for us readers carried along- the characters have much more life to live after all.

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!)(&!#)(&!)&!#PO(&) Ahahaha I tried to post this last night and screwed it up, so here you guys go.,

I go to get my seventh book tonight!! WOOT!! The adult cover looks so darn hot! Aheh. Anyway, it's too darn late for me to edit, as I have work tomorrow...whistles innocently I hope everyone enjoyed the super long last post! And I can't wait to read all your responses to, what I must admit, is a chapter I can't believe I actually wrote (Really, I feel super good about writing this one).

So Chau and best wishes,
Crazy Mishka